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Development of the RAND State Firearm Law Database and Supporting Materials

RAND launched its Gun Policy in America initiative in January 2016 with the goal of creating objective, factual resources for policymakers and the public on the effects of gun policies and laws. Research in this area has often consisted of cross-sectional studies that examine how firearm outcomes differ in a particular year across states with different policies.

Many fewer studies have used more-powerful longitudinal research designs to evaluate the effects of gun laws, partly because longitudinal data on most state gun laws are not widely available and are



difficult and time-consuming to construct. Therefore, as part of its Gun Policy in America initiative, RAND developed a longitudinal database of state firearm laws—which is free to researchers and the general public—to support improved analysis and understanding of the effects of various laws. This document presents the methods that RAND researchers used to construct the RAND State

Firearm Law Database and provides definitions and other information that facilitate its use.¹

Approach to Developing the RAND State Firearm Law Database

Our objective in developing the RAND State Firearm Law Database was to produce a data set that would be useful to those interested in understanding the effects of several classes of laws over time. We used a multistage approach to developing, updating and checking the dataset. Initially, we relied on secondary sources to collect laws from 1979 through January 2020 that corresponded to the law categories listed in Table 1 that others had identified and classified. We systematically searched for and reviewed the text of these laws and independently verified that they met our law definitions. Subsequently, we have expanded the laws and years covered in the database, relying on a combination of original research and secondary sources listed in the following section. We have also compared our coding of laws with those of other law databases and research papers to identify errors in

our database or clarify differences between our definitions of law classes and those used by others who have coded the same laws. The list of law classes in Table 1 is, of course, only a subset of all possible firearm laws that could be studied. Our hope is that we or others will expand the number of law categories included in the dataset. As we have developed this database, we prioritized classes of laws that we knew had been implemented in many states during the past 40 years because there is more information available to help examine the effects of those laws.

In addition to classifying state laws into the categories listed in Table 1, each record in the database includes other important fields, as outlined in Table 2.

First Stage of Database Development: Secondary Sources

The initial draft of the data set relied on information provided in the following three secondary sources:

- “Evaluating Gun Policy: Effects on Crime and Violence,” by Jon S. Vernick and Lisa M. Hep-

burn (2003), which covers a subset of the state laws in Table 1 from 1979 to 1999

- the proprietary Firearm Legislation Dataset (FLD), which is compiled and maintained by the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence and lists many types of firearm bills that have been considered by state legislatures from 2008 to 2016²
- *Regulating Guns in America: An Evaluation and Comparative Analysis of Federal, State and Selected Local Gun Laws*, published by the Legal Community Against Violence (2006), which describes many types of state firearm laws in effect in 2008.

To find the effective dates for the laws, we generally relied on the notes provided by the digest at the end of each section of code, confirmed by the effective dates in the state session law that created that section. For the state session laws that did not provide an effective date, we relied on the general rules for each state, as provided by StateScape (undated).

TABLE 1

State Firearm Law Categories Used in the RAND State Firearm Law Database

Gun Law Category	Specification	Definition
Background checks	Private sales: point of sale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Requires a background check to be completed by a federal firearms licensee or law enforcement agency prior to the transfer of any weapon with few exceptions. Private transactions must therefore be completed with the assistance of a federal firearms licensee or law enforcement agency at the point of sale.
	Private sales – optional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Allows private sellers to conduct a background check of individuals purchasing guns; includes background checks for permits to purchase where the permit is valid for 30 days or less
	Sales from dealers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Requires licensed dealers to conduct a background check of individuals who purchase guns
	Sales from dealers – federal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Requires licensed dealers to conduct background checks pursuant to federal laws passed in 1994 (interim provisions) and 1998 (National Instant Criminal Background Check System)
	Permit to purchase <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Requires law enforcement to conduct a background check before a permit to purchase a gun may be issued. Additional background checks for individual firearm purchases are not required while the permit is valid.
	Extra time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Extends the period of time a dealer must wait before transferring a firearm without a completed background check
	State version of Brady requirements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun 	Extends the federal criminal background check requirement to all firearms

Table 1–Continued

Gun Law Category	Specification	Definition
Carrying a concealed weapon (CCW)	Prohibited <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Prohibits individuals from carrying guns in a concealed manner
	May issue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Requires permits for CCW; gives law enforcement discretion to issue permits to allow CCW; can include subjective criteria for issuing permits. For example, “In <i>NYSRPA [New York State Rifle and Pistol Association] v. Bruen</i> , the Supreme Court held that New York’s ‘may issue’ law violated the Second Amendment. Following <i>Bruen</i> , these jurisdictions issued guidance that licensing authorities should not enforce the may-issue provisions in these laws.” ^a In <i>Bruen</i> , the court also found that the discretion exercised by Delaware and Rhode Island was not unconstitutional. Therefore, the database continues to count these states as “may issue” states.
	Shall issue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Requires permits for CCW; removes law enforcement discretion in issuing permits; permits may still be issued conditionally on satisfying objective criteria set out in law for CCW
	Shall issue (permit not required) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Allows individuals to carry concealed weapons without a permit
Castle doctrine	Traditional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Allows individuals to use deadly force in defense of themselves, others, and their property without the duty to retreat when they are threatened in their homes
	Expanded 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Expands castle doctrine beyond the home to the vehicle (or a family member’s vehicle) or place of work
	Expanded 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun and long gun Long gun 	Expands castle doctrine beyond the home, vehicle, or place of work to other specific places (e.g., private property owned by the individual, homes of others who have invited the individual to join them), although duty to retreat from a threat of deadly force in some contexts (e.g., a public street) remains in place
	Stand your ground <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun and long gun Long gun 	Expands castle doctrine to any location
Child-access prevention (CAP) laws	Negligent storage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Specifies civil or criminal penalties for storing a gun in a manner that allows or could reasonably be expected to allow access by a minor
	Intentional, knowing, or reckless provision <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits individuals from furnishing guns to minors
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safe storage Handgun Long gun 	Mandates safe storage of guns without conditions concerning whether a minor might access the firearm
Dealer license	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State license requirement Handgun Long gun 	Requires firearm dealers to be licensed by the state
Firearm removal at the scene of a domestic violence incident	Required <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Requires police officers to seize a firearm at the scene of a domestic violence incident
	Authorized <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Allows police officers to seize a firearm at the scene of a domestic violence incident

Table 1–Continued

Gun Law Category	Specification	Definition
Firearm sales restrictions	Assault weapon ban <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Ban on (1) sales of specified weapons or weapons that have features, defined by law, that classify them as assault rifles or assault pistols or (2) laws substantially similar to laws defining assault rifles or pistols
	Assault weapon ban - federal	A 10-year federal ban on the manufacture, transfer, or possession of semiautomatic weapons from September 13, 1994, to September 13, 2004. The ban applied only to weapons manufactured after the enactment date.
	Ban on high-capacity magazines <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Ban on sales of detachable or inbuilt high-capacity magazines, regardless of whether maximum acceptable capacity is specified
	Ban on high-capacity magazines - federal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	A 10-year federal ban on the manufacture, transfer, or possession of magazines that hold more than ten rounds of ammunition from September 13, 1994, to September 13, 2004
	Handgun ban <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Bans sale of all handguns
	Saturday night special ban <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Bans guns determined by law to be unsafe or of substandard quality
	One gun per month <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the purchase of more than one gun in a 30-day period
Firearms in colleges or universities	Private – possession prohibited <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the possession by private individuals of all firearms on the property of all private colleges and universities, regardless of whether the individuals have a license to carry a concealed weapon
	Public – possession prohibited <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the possession by private individuals of all firearms on the property of all public colleges and universities, regardless of whether the individuals have a license to carry a concealed weapon
	Public and private – possession prohibited <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the possession of all firearms on the property of all private and public colleges and universities
	Public – CCW allowed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Allows legal CCW on the property of all public colleges and universities
	Public – CCW allowed, open areas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Allows legal CCW in the open areas of all public colleges and universities
	Public – CCW not allowed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Prohibits CCW on the property of all public colleges and universities
	Public and private – CCW not allowed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Prohibits CCW on the property of all public and private colleges and universities
	Public and private – CCW allowed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Allows CCW on the property of all private and public colleges and universities
Firearms in kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) educational settings	School personnel other than peace officers	Allows school personnel, other than peace officers, to carry firearms on school property

Table 1–Continued

Gun Law Category	Specification	Definition
Gun trafficking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits any person from knowingly soliciting, encouraging, persuading, or enticing a dealer or other firearm seller to transfer a firearm under circumstances the person knows would violate federal or state law
	Straw purchase <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the purchase of a firearm for someone else
	Straw purchase – buyer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Penalizes the buyer for knowingly enticing a deal to sell firearms illegally
Local laws preempted by state	Limited <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits local laws and ordinances for specific classes of firearm laws (e.g., registration), specific uses of firearms (e.g., CCW), or specific classes of firearms (e.g., handguns); the seven types of preemption laws are represented by a unique law class subtype in the dataset (e.g., selective: manufacture, sale, or possession of imitation firearms)
	Comprehensive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Broadly prohibits local laws
	Comprehensive – punitive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Penalizes any person, county, agency, municipality, district, or other entity that passes local rules or regulations of state firearm legislation
Minimum age	Youth possession <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Establishes a minimum age for possession of a gun
	Minimum age possession – federal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Federal law prohibits the possession of a handgun or handgun ammunition by any person under the age of 18
	Minimum age purchase – federal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Licensed firearm dealer may not sell a handgun to any person under the age of 21 or a long gun to any person under the age of 18
	Purchase and sale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the sale to and purchase of guns by individuals under a specified age
Open carry	License required <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Requires licenses obtained from law enforcement for the open carrying of guns
	License required – loaded <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Requires licenses obtained from law enforcement for the open carrying of loaded guns
	Limited <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Allows individuals to openly carry guns without a license but with specific limitations, such as time of day or location
	Limited – prohibited, loaded <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the open carrying of loaded guns
	Prohibited <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the open carrying of guns
Permit to purchase	Required <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Requires prospective purchasers to first obtain a license or permit from law enforcement; does not include voluntary permit schemes

Table 1–Continued

Gun Law Category	Specification	Definition
	Optional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Establishes that the state maintains a system through which prospective purchasers may obtain a license or permit from law enforcement, but a permit is not required for all gun purchases.
	Maximum waiting period <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Establishes the maximum amount of time law enforcement may wait before issuing a permit or denying the application
Prohibited possessor	Mental health – adjudicated as mentally incompetent, incapacitated, or disabled <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the possession of firearms by individuals adjudicated as being mentally incompetent, incapacitated, or disabled; includes individuals who have court-appointed guardians and conservators, who are subject to court order because of mental illness, who have been judicially pronounced to be a danger to others as a result of a mental disorder or mental illness, and/or who have an intellectual disability ^b
	Mental health – committed to a mental health facility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the possession of firearms by individuals who have been involuntarily committed to mental institutions; includes all findings of insanity, mental illness, or incapacity pursuant to a criminal trial ^b
	Mental health – committed to a mental health facility – voluntary <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the possession of firearms by individuals who have been voluntarily committed to mental institutions ^b
	Mental health – committed to a mental health facility – outpatient <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the possession of firearms by individuals who have been court-ordered to attend outpatient mental health institutions ^b
	Mental health – adjudicated by police as being mentally incompetent, incapacitated, or disabled <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the possession of firearms by individuals who have been found by the police to be mentally incompetent, incapacitated, or disabled ^b
	Mental health – diagnosed with a significant behavioral, emotional or mental disorder <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits the possession of firearms by individuals who have been diagnosed with a significant behavioral, emotional, or mental disorder ^b
	Extreme-risk protection order (ERPO) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Allows law enforcement officials to petition a court to remove firearms from a person who is known to be a risk to themselves or others
	ERPO – expanded <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Allows people other than law enforcement, such as family members or medical professionals, to petition a court to remove firearms from a person who is known to be a risk to themselves or others
	ERPO – ex parte <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Allows law enforcement to petition a court to temporarily remove firearms from a person before the person has appeared in court
	ERPO – ex parte, expanded <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Allows law enforcement and others, such as family members or medical professionals, to petition a court to temporarily remove firearms from a person known to be a risk to themselves or others before the person has appeared in court

Table 1–Continued

Gun Law Category	Specification	Definition
	Domestic violence restraining order (DVRO) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Prohibits an individual who has been served with a DVRO from owning, possessing, or purchasing firearms
	DVRO – discretionary <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Prevents an individual who has been served with a DVRO from owning, possessing, or purchasing firearms if a judge determines that certain criteria are met or believes that the person is a credible threat to the victim
	DVRO – discretionary surrender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Prohibits an individual who has been served with a DVRO from owning, possessing, or purchasing firearms and outlines a process for ensuring the surrender of currently owned firearms; in some cases, the surrender is at the court's discretion based on the circumstances of the case (e.g., whether the person has violated an order previously or the judge believes that there is an immediate threat of harm to others)
	DVRO – discretionary removal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Prohibits an individual who has been served with a DVRO from owning, possessing, or purchasing firearms and outlines a process for the removal of currently owned firearms; in some cases, the removal is at the court's discretion based on the circumstances of the case (e.g., whether the person has violated an order previously or the judge believes that there is an immediate threat of harm to others)
	DVRO – expanded <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Extends the DVRO prohibition on firearm ownership, purchase, or possession to dating partners
	DVRO – ex parte <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Temporarily prevents an individual who has been served with an ex parte DVRO (executed before the individual appears in court to defend himself or herself) from owning, possessing, or purchasing firearms
	DVRO – ex parte, discretionary <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Temporarily prevents an individual who has been served with an ex parte DVRO from owning, possessing, or purchasing firearms if a judge determines that certain criteria are met or believes that the individual is a credible threat to the victim
	DVRO – ex parte, expanded <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Extends the ex parte DVRO prohibition to dating partners
	DVRO – ex parte, surrender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Temporarily prevents an individual who has been served with an ex parte DVRO from owning, possessing, or purchasing firearms and outlines a process for surrendering currently owned firearms
	DVRO – ex parte, discretionary surrender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Temporarily prevents an individual who has been served with an ex parte DVRO from owning, possessing, or purchasing firearms and outlines a process for ensuring the surrender of currently owned firearms; in some cases, the surrender is at the court's discretion according to the circumstances of the case (e.g., if the person has violated an order previously or the judge believes that there is an immediate threat of harm to others)
	DVRO – ex parte, removal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Temporarily prevents an individual who has been served with an ex parte DVRO from owning, possessing, or purchasing firearms and outlines a process for removing currently owned firearms
	Convicted of firearm-prohibiting crime – removal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Requires that police remove firearms from individuals who have been convicted of a firearm-prohibiting crime
	Convicted of domestic violence crime – removal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handgun • Long gun 	Requires that police remove firearms from individuals who have been convicted of a crime of domestic violence

Table 1–Continued

Gun Law Category	Specification	Definition
	Violent misdemeanor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits possession for people who have committed a violent misdemeanor, including simple assault, that is punishable by less than one year of incarceration. Misdemeanors relating to domestic violence do not, by themselves, qualify as violent misdemeanor laws.
	Violent misdemeanor - juvenile <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Restriction on firearm possession following a violent misdemeanor conviction limited to offenders 21 years of age or younger
	Violent misdemeanor - limited <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Prohibits people who have committed a violent misdemeanor from possessing a firearm for a limited period of time following the conviction
	Not RAND violent misdemeanor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	In contrast with the definitions used by Everytown and Crifasi, ^c RAND's definition requires that those convicted of simple assault be prohibited from purchasing or possessing any firearm. In some, but not all, cases, we have noted laws that datasets count as violent misdemeanor laws while the RAND database does not
	Registration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Requires a recordkeeping system controlled by a government agency that stores the names of current owners of each firearm of a specific class and requires that these records are updated after firearms are transferred to a new owner (with few exceptions)
Required reporting of lost or stolen firearms	Lost or stolen firearms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Requires victims of theft and those who have lost firearms to report the incident to relevant authorities
	Stolen firearms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Requires victims of theft of firearms to report the incident to relevant authorities
Safety training required	To purchase <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Requires a safety training certificate for the purchase of a firearm; the subclass excludes safety training required prior to the issuance of a permit to carry a concealed weapon
	To purchase: assault rifle	Requires a safety training certificate for the purchase of an assault rifle
	To carry <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Requires a safety training certificate to carry a firearm
Untraceable firearms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Bans the manufacture or sale of privately made firearms that lack serial numbers or manufacturer identification
Waiting period	General <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Establishes the minimum time that sellers must wait before delivering a gun to a purchaser; includes waiting periods for permits to purchase where the permit is valid for a short period and only for a single transaction
	Federal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun 	Federal law requiring a five-day waiting period immediately after the Brady Bill was passed and in effect from February 28, 1994, to November 30, 1998 (at the latest). States that already had a five-day waiting period were unaffected.
	De facto: permit to purchase <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Handgun Long gun 	Establishes a de facto waiting period; the state does not have a distinct waiting period law, but the requirement to obtain a permit before purchasing a firearm creates a de facto waiting period while the prospective purchaser applies for the permit and the application is processed
	Semi-automatic rifles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long gun 	Establishes the minimum amount of time licensed dealers must wait before delivering a semi-automatic rifle to a purchaser

^a Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated-b.

^b We do not code laws that restrict only purchase or carry without also restricting possession. We also do not include restrictions based on substance abuse.

^c Everytown for Gun Safety, 2024; Crifasi et al., 2018.

TABLE 2
Fields for Each Record in the Database

Field	Definition and Purpose
Law ID	Unique law identifier created and assigned by RAND to facilitate communication about a specific law
State	Name of state
State postal abbreviation	Abbreviation of name of state
FIPS Code	Two-digit state code used by Federal Information Processing Standards (FIPS) publications
Law class (number)	Unique identifier for each law class
Law class	Indicates the gun law category (e.g., background checks, waiting period)
Law class subtype	Indicates the specification of the gun law category (e.g., private sales, shall issue)
Handguns or long guns	Indicates the types of firearms specified by the law
Effect	Specifies whether the law had a restrictive or permissive effect relative to the legal regime prior to its implementation; categorizes how a new law differs from the law it amends or replaces or from the status quo (if the new law imposes greater restrictions on gun access or use, we categorize it as having a restrictive effect; if it eases access or use restrictions, we categorize it as having a permissive effect)
Type of change	Specifies whether the entry is a new law being implemented, a modification of an existing law, or the repeal of a law
Effective date note	Notes that, for some older laws, the exact day and month the law went into effect is not known, so January 1 is used
Effective date year	Year the law took effect
Effective date month	Month the law took effect
Effective date day	Day the law took effect
Statutory citation	Citation to the specific section(s) of the statute where the law is found
Content	Excerpts from the relevant statutes
Supersession date	If the law was replaced or modified by a later law, specifies the date when this occurred; this field is deprecated and will be removed in future releases
Supersession date year	If the law was replaced or modified by a later law, specifies the year when this occurred
Supersession date month	If the law was replaced or modified by a later law, specifies the month when this occurred
Supersession date day	If the law was replaced or modified by a later law, specifies the day when this occurred
Age for minimum age laws	Specifies the age that a minimum age law uses to determine who can purchase or possess firearms under the statute
Length of waiting period (days, handguns)	Specifies the number of days a person must wait to purchase a handgun under handgun waiting-period laws; states with permitting requirements have been assigned a value of ten days for their de facto waiting period in "Length of Waiting Period (Days)"
Additional context and notes	Provides information that illuminates peculiarities in the law or events surrounding its passage that are relevant when analyzing the effect or impact of the law

None of the secondary sources contained all the information we wanted to include in the data set. In addition, in some cases, our categorization of laws differed from those in the secondary sources. For instance, Vernick and Hepburn (2003) coded laws that restated that the federal law prohibiting licensed sellers from selling a firearm “without conducting a criminal history background check in accordance with regulations promulgated by the United States Department of Justice pursuant to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System” (11 Del.C. § 1448A, for example) as *waiting period* laws and specified the waiting period length as “instant” (Vernick and Hepburn, 2003, p. 372). We coded such laws in a new category called *extra time* to refer to state laws that extend the period of time a dealer must wait before transferring a firearm without a completed background check.

From the FLD, we extracted all state bills from 2008 to 2016 that concerned any of our selected gun law categories. The dataset includes all legislation that made minor changes to gun laws, including nonsubstantive changes (such as those changing definitions of various terms) or modifications to minor procedural elements (such as laws that change the concealed-carry permit renewal process in ways we judged to have negligible effects on gun owners). The FLD also includes types of laws that we have not yet included or chose not to include in the current version of the database, such as some prohibited possessor laws.

While the Vernick and Hepburn (2003) data cover 1979 to 1999, and the FLD covers most laws from 2008 to 2016, we had no similarly comprehensive source of state law data for 1999 to 2007. However, a report by the Legal Community Against Violence (2006) describes many state gun laws in effect in 2008, including those implemented in earlier years, and provides statutory citations to all laws.

Second Stage of Database Development: Primary Sources

Once we completed the first phase of database development, we had a large list of state laws but had not yet verified the codings that we extracted from sec-

ondary sources. In addition, we were aware of two other weaknesses in our use of the secondary sources: In most cases, not all of the fields that we wished to use to describe laws in the dataset could be completed using just those secondary sources, and our approach to filling in laws from 1999 to 2007 meant that we could have overlooked laws that were implemented and repealed during this period. To address these concerns, we collected and reviewed the statutory language for all laws included in the database to complete missing field entries, and we conducted a broad search for laws that our first-stage procedures might have omitted.

To assemble a library of all laws referenced in the RAND data set, we primarily relied on Westlaw, LexisNexis, and HeinOnline. We used Westlaw and LexisNexis to find current laws, as well as legislation going back as far as 30 years or so, depending on the state. For older laws, we used the information in Westlaw and LexisNexis, which provide “credits” or “historical notes” on the bills in which these laws were passed or amended and then looked for these in HeinOnline’s session law library.

In some cases, we could not find online sources for laws that we were investigating. In these cases, we contacted law librarians in various states, who kindly sent us PDFs of the laws we sought. In a handful of cases, we could not find the text of older laws and therefore relied on information provided in academic articles. Those secondary sources also helped us understand the controlling laws or the status quo in 1979, when our data series begins. For example, we needed to understand whether, in a given state, concealed carry was allowed or prohibited prior to the passage of the first such law after 1979.

In verifying every law, we occasionally identified laws with statutory citations or effective dates that differed from those we would have ascribed to them. We discussed all such differences as a team and rendered a consensus judgment on the proper coding of the law. We note most deviations from other secondary sources in the “caveats and ambiguities” column of the database. Some of these were based on ambiguous laws and disagreement among experts about whether a certain law had a specific intention and effect. For example, Vernick and Hepburn (2003) disagree with Peters, Cook, and Ludwig (2005)

about the year when Hawaii implemented a minimum age of 18 for permits to purchase handguns. In such cases, we coded the law according to what we thought the most reasonable interpretation was, but we note the disagreement in the “additional context and notes” column. As noted earlier, this process was iterative, and during this period of checking and verifying the laws, we further refined our codes for the types of laws.

To help ensure that we were not missing current laws, an important resource we used was the gun law information provided on the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence (undated-a) website. To help find laws, we also relied on many newspaper and journal articles,³ websites,⁴ and court cases and opinions.⁵ As part of this task, we broadened our search of laws to include those that might have been implemented many years before 1979 but that were the controlling laws for each category of laws at the beginning of our dataset. We verified that these laws were in effect in 1979 and had not been repealed. These controlling laws are entered in the database and coded as preexisting at the start of the study period. These laws are used to determine whether the first such law implemented since 1979 had a restrictive or a permissive effect on access to or use of guns in the state, relative to laws in effect at the start of the period.

Error Checking and Comparisons with Other Published Sources

RAND maintains an email address to which users of the database can and do submit proposed edits and corrections. All such suggestions are investigated and adopted if we concur with the change. In addition, we attempt to validate the laws we have identified and their effective dates against peer-reviewed articles and other firearms policy databases. When discrepancies are discovered, RAND researchers conduct further original legal research to determine whether they result from differences in law definitions, differences in coding date of passage vs date of implementation, or errors in coding of the laws in our own or others’ work. A list of reviewed laws and comparison sources is available in Table 3.

Limitations of the RAND State Firearm Law Database

The following are several limitations of the RAND State Firearm Law Database that its users should consider:

- Laws are typically written differently in each state and are thus subject to wide variation in their content and specifics. For research purposes, we believe that it is convenient to aggregate similar laws within categories like those used in the RAND database. Only with such aggregation is it possible to describe laws that have been implemented in multiple states, which is a prerequisite for many statistical analyses of the effects of such laws. However, aggregation can be subjective, both when deciding what level of aggregation to pursue and when making decisions about whether to classify individual laws that might not fit the category as well as others. We expect, therefore, that others reviewing the RAND database might disagree with the categories we selected or with some of the laws we classified as belonging to a given category.
- There are many important types of gun laws that we have not included in the database, merely because we did not have the time and resources to undertake a more comprehensive analysis of laws. For instance, the database includes no laws that specify sentencing enhancements for firearm crimes. Each year, however, we add more types of laws to the database to make it more comprehensive.
- Even when we have included a category of laws in the database, it is possible that our procedures led us to overlook a law that is relevant to the category, making the database incomplete.
- The database contains no information on how laws were implemented, how well information about new laws was disseminated, how laws were enforced, or how long the state required before a law was fully implemented as designed. Such implementation details could be critically important for understanding why

TABLE 3

Comparison of RAND State Firearm Law Database with External Sources

State Firearm Laws	Comparison Sources
State ban on assault weapons or high-capacity magazines	Koper (2013), Siegel (2020)
Background checks for private sales	Crifasi et al. (2018); Everytown for Gun Safety (2025); Hepburn, Azrael, and Miller (2022); Siegel et al. (2019)
Background checks for sales from a dealer	Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence (undated-a), Siegel et al. (2019)
Carrying a concealed weapon – shall issue	Donohue, Aneja, and Weber (2018); Everytown for Gun Safety (2025); Siegel et al. (2019); Steidley (2019); Webster (2020)
Child access prevention – negligent storage	Azad et al. (2020); Anderson, Sabia, and Tekin (2021); Siegel et al. (2019)
Domestic violence restraining order	Doucette, Crifasi, and Frattaroli (2019); Siegel et al. (2019); Wallin, Holliday, and Zeoli (2022); Zeoli and Webster (2019); Zeoli et al. (2019)
Extreme-risk protection order	Everytown for Gun Safety (2025), Siegel et al. (2019)
Local laws preempted by the state	Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence (undated-a), Siegel et al. (2019)
Minimum age for purchase of a handgun	Siegel et al. (2019), Rosengart et al. (2005), Webster et al. (2004)
Minimum age of possession	Gius (2015), Marvell (2001), Webster et al. (2004)
Stand-your-ground	Ferraro and Ghatak (2019), McClellan and Tekin (2016), Siegel (2021)
Prohibited possessor for mental health	Everytown for Gun Safety (2024), Siegel et al. (2019)
Waiting period for a handgun	Everytown for Gun Safety (2025); Giffords (2023); Luca, Malhotra, and Polinquin (2017); Siegel et al. (2019)
Waiting period – one-day	Edwards et al. (2018), Luca et al. (2017), Siegel et al. (2019)
Waiting period – seven-period	Edwards et al. (2018)
Violent misdemeanor	Crifasi et al. (2018), Everytown for Gun Safety (2025), Siegel et al. (2019)

laws appeared to have greater or lesser effects in different states.

Despite these limitations, RAND has made the State Firearm Law Database available to the public as is, without any warranty or assurances that it is complete or fully accurate, because we believe that, even with some possible errors, it represents an important resource that has been unavailable for those interested in understanding the effects of gun laws.

Moreover, by making the database publicly available, it is our hope that others will review our work and provide us with information or feedback on how it could be improved, including suggestions for more-useful categorizations of laws, more-accurate classifications of laws within categories, citations to any laws that we might have inadvertently omitted from the database, or information on state gun laws in categories that we have not yet begun to develop.

Notes

- ¹ Although not all guns are firearms, in this document and in the database, we follow conventional use in U.S. policy discussions and treat the terms gun and firearm as interchangeable.
- ² This dataset is not publicly available and was provided to RAND by the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.
- ³ See, for example, Cramer and Kopel, 1995; Holstein and Le, 2003; Gorovitz and Ferri, 1999; Nieto, 1997; McDowall, Loftin, and Wiersema, 1995; Jansen and Nugent-Borakove, 2007; “Hot Guns: Are There Laws on Cheap Handguns in Your Town?” 1997; Peters, Cook, and Ludwig, 2005; MacNutt, 2015; Marso, 2013; Ayres and Donohue, 2009; Lenzen, 1995; Grossman and Lee, 2008; Luedtke, 1977; Carpenter, 2003; Bash, 1996; Rosengart et al., 2005; Sheppard, 1969; Sorens, Muedini, and Ruger, 2008; Warner, 1938; and Catalfamo, 2007.
- ⁴ See, for example, U.S. Concealed Carry, undated; National Rifle Association, undated; National Conference of State Legislatures, undated; and Cramer, undated.
- ⁵ See, for example, Kelley, 1987; *People v. Ephriam*, 2001; *People v. Graves*, 1974; *People v. Williamson*, 1978; *Siccardi v. State*, 1971; *State v. Kamelo*, 1977; *State v. Graves*, 1974.

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About This Tool

RAND launched its Gun Policy in America initiative in January 2016 with the goal of creating objective, factual resources for lawmakers and the public on the effects of gun policies. Research in this area has often consisted of cross-sectional studies examining how firearm outcomes differ in a particular year across states with different policies. Many fewer studies have used more-powerful longitudinal research designs to evaluate the effects of gun laws, partly because the longitudinal data on states' gun laws are not widely available and are difficult and time-consuming to construct. Therefore, as part of its Gun Policy in America initiative, RAND developed a longitudinal database of state firearm laws that would be made free to the public and other researchers to support improved analysis and understanding of the effects of laws. This document presents the methods that RAND researchers used to construct the RAND State Firearm Law Database and provides definitions and other information that facilitates its use. This document updates an earlier version with information about new laws and fields that were added to version 4.0 of the database in summer 2021. This document is up to date as of January 1, 2024.

The State Firearm Law Database is one of several research products stemming from the Gun Policy in America initiative. All the project resources are publicly available on the project website at www.rand.org/gunpolicy.

The work should be of interest to policymakers and other stakeholders looking for information on state firearm legislation in the United States, as well as to anyone from the research community and the general public who wants to use the RAND State Firearm Database to better understand the effects of gun laws.

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Justice Policy Program

RAND Social and Economic Well-Being is a division of RAND that seeks to actively improve the health and social and economic well-being of populations and communities throughout the world. This research was conducted in the Justice Policy Program within RAND Social and Economic Well-Being. The program focuses on such topics as access to justice, policing, corrections, drug policy, and court system reform, as well as other policy concerns pertaining to public safety and criminal and civil justice. For more information, email justicepolicy@rand.org.