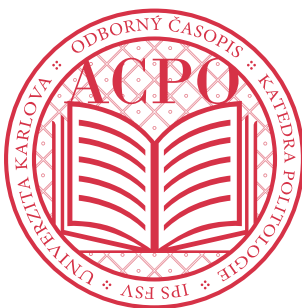


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## Do not Just Blame the Gun: The Midwestern Insight into the Relationship between Gun Laws and Firearm Mortality<sup>1</sup>

*Martin Zilvar*<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract:

*Gun violence has been a prevalent phenomenon in the United States for decades. The article investigates the extent to which the reality in the Midwestern states reflects empirical assumptions regarding the impact of gun laws on firearm mortality rates. It proceeds according to a coherent framework constructed from synthesized scholarly findings. Based on the conducted comparative analysis of five Midwestern states, selected according to the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) approach, the findings indicate that while firearm suicides operated as predicted, firearm homicides failed the empirical assumptions as the state with the most robust gun laws fell remarkably behind others. The article concludes that implementing alternative measures addressing the availability of guns and development programs in disadvantaged communities, alongside traditional gun laws, may help decrease firearm homicides in American states.*

**Key words:** *gun laws; firearm mortality; comparative analysis; the Midwestern United States*

### Introduction

Since the first settlers reached the coasts of the New World, firearms were ever-present in the newly established communities. Not only did they serve to protect the colonizers, firearms later also were essential in preserving the integrity of the Thirteen Colonies and later the United States. As adult men<sup>3</sup> had to serve in state militias (Reinders, 1997), private gun ownership became an indispensable part of American culture. Although such militias ceased to exist in the early 1900s due to the introduction of the National Guard (Boehm, 2013), private gun ownership followed quite the opposite development. While the number of existing firearms would have armed 12.5% of white men<sup>4</sup> in 1830, the percentage surged

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<sup>3</sup> Understand as white, Protestant, non-immigrant, and property-owning individuals possessing muskets and ammunition.

<sup>4</sup> Bellesiles focused on this ethnic and gender group as they have always enjoyed the right to keep and bear

to 335% in the 1990s (Bellesiles, 1996: 431–432). Nowadays, it is believed that more than 393 million guns exist in the United States (Ingraham, 2018).

Does such a development matter? As the common saying of gun advocates goes, ‘Guns don’t kill people; people kill people.’ Should we live in a perfect world, this reasoning would unquestionably describe the reality. However, our Hobbesian society is far from perfect. From a broader perspective of firearm mortality, the United States has long dominated the Western world (World Population Review, n.d.). Not only did 45,222 Americans lose their lives to firearms in 2020 alone, but gun violence also surpassed car accidents as the leading cause of death among children and adolescents that same year (Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solution, 2022; Clayton, 2022). And yet, the country remains deeply divided over the solution. Whereas the Democratic Party advocates for stricter gun laws, the Republican Party proposes the opposite. Such a stalemate only allows the deadly phenomenon to cause more pain nationwide. For this reason, the present article contributes to the discussion on the relationship between gun laws and firearm mortality. By synthesizing relevant scholarly findings about the effects of various measures into a coherent framework, it explores the reality in five Midwestern states to answer the following research question:

*RQ: To what extent do firearm mortality, suicides and homicides, respectively, reflect the empirical assumptions about the outcome of gun laws in the Midwestern states?*

To do so, the article proceeds as follows. In the next section, a literature review indicates the hitherto research and potential approaches to the matter. Afterward, it examines the empirical evidence about the effect of gun laws on firearm mortality. Subsequently, the article presents and discusses its methodological choices. The penultimate part unveils the discovered findings. A discussion of their implication and advice for future research concludes the article.

## **Literature review**

As the United States has struggled with gun violence for decades, many authors have paid attention to this prevalent phenomenon (Murray, 1975; Lester & Murrell, 1981; Lester & Murrell, 1982; Alexander et al., 1985; Sloan et al., 1990; Wintemute, 1996; Wintemute et al., 1999; Koper & Roth, 2002; Ludwig & Cook, 2003; Ludwig, 2005; Kovandzic & Marvell, 2006; Harcourt, 2010; Knight, 2013; Kalesan et al., 2017; Castillo-Carniglia, 2019; Branas et al., 2021; Ssentongo et al., 2021; Crandall et al., 2021). The literature developed around four cornerstones. While some authors addressed environments in which people purchase firearms (Jehan et al., 2017), others centered on the outcome of particular gun laws (Siegel et al., 2019). In contrast, a different group of scholars went beyond these traditional areas and observed the sources of confiscated crime guns (Collins et al., 2017). A growing number of authors do not focus on firearms themselves but emphasize the role of mental health services since guns are widely present throughout the United States (Meszaros, 2017; Goldstein et al., 2019) or connect both dimensions together (Smith & Spiegler, 2017).

Another angle was shown by those focusing on not only firearm mortality in general but also on subgroups, i.e., homicides and suicides (Rosengart et al., 2005; Rodríguez, firearms in the United States. Therefore, the group represents a sufficient source of analytical evidence.

2011; Hamilton et al., 2018; Madhavan et al., 2019; Goyal et al., 2019; Azad et al., 2020). Centering on this current, some authors examined the relationship between them and gun laws regulating firearm access and use, i.e., child access prevention, right-to-carry, and stand-your-ground laws (Schell et al., 2020; Siegel et al., 2017; Doucette et al., 2019; Degli et al., 2022). In contrast, Kaufman et al. (2020) paid particular attention to the impact of gun laws on firearm mortality among a specific ethnic minority. Notably, some untraditional approaches have gained more attention in recent years. For instance, while Pallin et al. (2020) examined the effect of California's extreme risk protection order laws, O'Shaughnessy (2021) addressed the growing risk associated with 3D-printed firearms. Sutherland and McKenney (2021) explored the link between the coronavirus pandemic and gun violence.

Notwithstanding, the impact and effectiveness of gun laws remains a divisive topic among scholars. Not only have some authors deconstructed some more widely accepted measures as relatively ineffective (Kleck & Patterson, 1993), others have argued that traditional gun laws are always destined to fail due to the enormous number of firearms circulating in the United States (Moorhouse & Wanner, 2006). Also, there is disagreement over the effectiveness of available mental health care, as some suggest that measures restraining access and use to guns bear much more fruit. Their argument lies in the relatively small contribution of people suffering from mental health illness to the rate of firearm mortality (Honberg, 2021; Rozel & Mulvey, 2017). Finally, yet importantly, some studies have warned that while limiting gun ownership may seem to positively influence firearm suicides, in particular at first sight, the portion caused by guns may only transfer to non-firearm categories (Ghiani et al., 2019).

Given this discussion, the article follows those considering the existence of gun laws as a precondition for low firearm mortality and examines such reasoning vis-à-vis the empirical evidence derived from the Midwestern United States, as this region remains quite understudied. While some scholars have paid attention to some individual states (Webster et al., 2014; Tuan & Frey III, 2017; Kivisto & Phalen, 2018; Megan, 2023) or included them in countrywide analyses (Bottiani et al., 2021; Esposti et al., 2022; Kalesan et al., 2016), comparing and centering solely on policy outcomes of their gun control frameworks may provide new insights. To do so, one must first understand how the empirical findings portray the relationship between gun laws and firearm mortality in the first place.

## **Understanding the effect of gun laws on firearm mortality**

First and foremost, the relationship between gun laws and firearm mortality is likely influenced by several known and unknown factors. In other words, a factor that compels one person to pull the trigger may have little or no impact on somebody else. Also, it is necessary to remember that gun laws comprise various instruments intended to influence different subcategories of firearm mortality, i.e., homicides and suicides. Hence, the article must proceed according to a rigorous framework anchored in scholarly findings indicating the expected empirical outcome of various gun laws (Kleck & Patterson, 1993; Kwon & Baack, 2005; Aneja et al., 2011; Luca et al., 2017; Siegel et al., 2017; Guettabi & Munasib, 2017; Jehan et al., 2017; Kivisto & Phalen, 2018; Doucette et al., 2019; Hernandez et al., 2019; Siegel et al., 2019; Swanson et al., 2019; McCourt et al., 2020; Schell et al., 2020; Kaufman et al., 2020; Ashworth & Kozinetz, 2021; Barnard et al., 2021; Kivisto et al., 2021; Neufeld et al., 2021; Degli et al., 2022; Kawano et al., 2023; Smart et al., 2023). What is

apparent from those studies is the varying perceived effectiveness of each measure. While some are quite frequently recommended, others are disparaged. Also, there are measures whose empirical impact remains contested.

A closer look at the former group indicates that background checks represent the most effective gun law, which American states have imposed in two ways. They have either mandated it alongside other predetermined qualifications that prospective firearm owners must meet to obtain a firearm license or impose it as the sole condition, known as a permit-to-purchase (PTP). While both are targeted at protecting the buyer and other people living in close proximity from gun misuse by the owner, children and teenagers residing in households with firearm are particularly at risk of suicide and unintentional death. For this reason, child access prevention (CAP) laws, mandating secure firearm storage, are also widely recommended, as are extreme risk protection orders (ERPOs), allowing state courts to confiscate legally possessed guns if their owners are believed to pose an imminent danger to themselves or others. Notably, the conspicuous benefit of ERPOs is embedded in their intention to protect gun owners and others from gun violence, particularly firearm suicides. In contrast, the least recommended measure is a lenient approach to right-to-carry (RTC) laws, specifying the conditions for carrying concealed firearms (see below for more detailed differentiation), which has been associated with increases in firearm homicides.

Aside from the aforementioned, there are other instruments that some studies support but others question. Such contradictory evaluation categorizes them somewhere in the middle. Indeed, their implementation may help decrease firearm mortality; however, the observed influence might also be caused by some confounding factor. That said, it seems likely such gun laws may be insufficient without also implementing another instrument. As for particular measures, stand-your-ground (SYG) laws, mandatory waiting periods, firearm registration, assault weapons bans, high-capacity magazine bans, and minimum purchasing age fall into this category. In other words, while a high-capacity magazine ban unquestionably influences the number of people a shooter can hit without reloading, this measure by no means directly averts the threat of firearm misuse. In contrast, imposing firearm licensing or PTP alone has the potential to deprive dangerous individuals of the possibility to acquire guns and, therefore, save lives.

Considering this, the article proposes a dichotomous division of existing gun laws into a self-sufficient and supportive set. While the former likely have the power to directly impact firearm mortality, the latter alone seem incapable of significantly influencing gun violence. Looking at particular measures, firearm licensing, PTP, CAP laws, ERPOs, and restrictive RTC laws represent the self-sufficient set. Of those, the former two seem to be the most effective. On the contrary, mandatory waiting periods, firearm registration, assault weapons bans, high-capacity magazine bans, and minimum purchasing age constitute the supportive group.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research design***

Before designing the research, the initial question was whether to proceed inductively or deductively. While the former encourages authors to collect data from which they later identify converging patterns, the latter emphasizes the indispensable role of existing

theories guiding the inquiry (DeCarlo, 2018: 153-156). Considering the research question, the article would not have answered it without the conceptual framework indicating the expected effects of the analyzed gun laws. Also, empirical evidence guided the case selection, described below. Therefore, it proceeded deductively and adopted the qualitative approach, as it neither collected numerical data nor employed numerical measurements to answer the research question.

Centering on the particular method, the case study approach was appropriate. Despite its frequent employment in social sciences (Benton & Peterka-Benton, 2020: 11), no consensus exists on its proper definition (Kitchenham et al., 1995; Rowley, 2002; Siggelkow, 2007; Gerring, 2007; Alpi & Evans, 2019). Thus, the article views it through Gerring's (2007: 20) lenses, portraying a case study as *the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that is – at least in part – to shed light on a larger class of cases*. Of its six existing variants, the article adopts the interpretative one, recommended for studies where *a generalization is applied to a specific case with the aim of throwing light on the case rather than of improving the generalization* (Lijphart 1971: 692). Given this, it is necessary to admit that case studies are not exempt from academic criticism. Even Lijphart himself points out that their scientific status is somewhat questionable as they neither constitute the basis for establishing generalizations nor for disproving established ones (Ibid. 691). In Idowu's (2016) view, this design is prone to causal determinism, non-replicability, subjective conclusions, absence of generalizable findings, biased case selection, and limited empirical evidence. Indeed, those weaknesses must be acknowledged; however, the article suggests they could be minimized should methodological choices be transparently presented, deductive proceedings adopted, and theory-guided case selection utilized.

### **Data collection and case selection**

As for data collection, the article gathers both primary and secondary data. While state laws, provisions, statutes, or regulations represented the former, the Giffords Law Center's database constituted the latter if no sought legislation existed in a given state. After collecting data, they were analyzed based on comparative analysis, allowing for a structured and focused comparison of a small number of cases to identify similarities and variances among the units of interest (Collier, 1993: 105; Drobnič, 2014: 1125). As various known and unknown factors very likely influence the relationship between gun laws and firearm mortality, the article uses selected cases according to the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) approach to reconcile with such complexity as it allows inquiries to *keep constant as many extraneous variables as possible* (Anckar 2008: 289).

To select the most similar Midwestern states, the article scrutinizes the 12 candidates according to two conditions, i.e., 1) poverty rates and 2) African-American population, reflecting the findings of Fredrick (2018), Pear et al. (2018), Mitchell and Bromfield (2019), Kaufman et al. (2020), Barrett et al. (2021), Rees et al. (2022), Niamatullah et al. (2023), and CDC (2023) arguing that gun-related deaths predominantly occur in economically disadvantaged environments and African-American males are the most at risk of firearm homicides. On the contrary, the article disregards the Republican–Democratic party line differentiation due to its focus on policy outcomes. Regarding poverty rates, it employed the U.S. Census Bureau's 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates to frame the first condition. As for the proportion of the African-American population, the second determinant

adopted data from the Demographic Profile of the latest 2020 Census, available on the U.S. Census Bureau's website. After applying them to all of the Midwestern states, Missouri, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois were indicated as the most similar. Not only do a comparable percentage of people living in poverty reside in those states, they also have quite similar proportions of African-Americans (see Table 1).

**Table 1: The African-American population and poverty rates in the Midwestern states**

Midwestern states	African-American population	Poverty rates
Illinois	14.1%	11.8%
Indiana	9.6%	12.5%
Iowa	4.1%	11.0%
Kansas	5.7%	11.5%
Michigan	13.7%	13.3%
Minnesota	7.0%	9.2%
Missouri	11.4%	12.8%
Nebraska	4.9%	10.3%
North Dakota	3.4%	10.7%
Ohio	12.5%	13.4%
South Dakota	2.0%	12.5%
Wisconsin	6.4%	10.7%

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau.

Apart from those similarities, each selected state also has a city known for very high gun violence, particularly firearm homicides, i.e., St. Louis, Detroit, Indianapolis, Cleveland, and Chicago (Everytown, 2022). Whereas this characteristic was not included in the predetermined conditions according to which the article selected the states, such evidence only underlines and further illustrates their appropriateness for the analysis. What is noteworthy and must be acknowledged is that Chicago experienced the lowest number of firearm homicides per 100,000 people among those cities despite the widespread belief suggesting the opposite. Indeed, its rates are far from ideal; however, St. Louis dominates such statistics, as it accounted for at least more than twofold the annual firearm homicides per 100,000 people than the other cities (Ibid.). Such disparity must have been mentioned to provide readers with important context. Without knowing this, some might falsely consider Chicago's megalopolis nature as the catalyst of its high firearm homicide rates.

### ***Operationalization of the analyzed gun laws***

Before describing the observed gun laws, one must first understand the American political system's federal nature, allowing both governing levels to introduce laws, provisions, statutes, or regulations impacting private gun ownership. While the federal ones must be abided by nationwide, each state can pass restrictions affecting their jurisdictions. Given this, it is also necessary to elaborate on the issue of background checks, which not only underline the federal-state differentiation but also specify the instrument the analysis sought.

Under federal law, federally licensed firearm dealers are obliged to conduct a check unless the applicant holds a firearm license or a permit issued by a state or local government.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, unlicensed sellers are exempt from such a requirement<sup>6</sup> (Giffords Law Center, n.d.a). However, state legislatures can, and do, introduce additional measures intended to incorporate even the latter under this mandate and, therefore, close the existing loop-hole, thanks to which quite a high number of gun owners legally purchase firearms without passing a background check (Miller et al., 2017). Therefore, when the article refers to background checks, it understands them as any state-imposed measure requiring prospective gun owners to undergo it before purchasing firearms from unlicensed sellers.

Aside from the fact that both governing levels can influence private gun ownership, the widespread idea of the effect of interstate transfers must also be addressed regarding the federal nature of the American political system when observing the relationship between gun laws and firearm mortality. In other words, many assume that should individuals be ineligible for purchasing firearms in their home states, they could simply travel to a different state with more lenient gun laws and acquire them there. While such reasoning is understandable, it does not reflect the reality. Under federal law, only federally licensed firearm dealers can acquire and transfer handguns from a seller or transferor residing in a different state. In other words, ordinary citizens are prohibited from directly purchasing handguns outside their home states. However, they can legally do so only should the handgun sale or transfer be conducted through a federally licensed firearm dealer in the buyer's state of residence, who performs a background check as federal law requires, applying also to online purchases. That said, interstate handgun purchases equal the in-state ones from federally licensed firearm dealers. As for long guns, individuals can legally buy them in a different state only if both sides meet in person, the sale or transfer is conducted by a federally licensed firearm dealer, who performs a background check, and complies with both parties' home state laws (Giffords Law Center, n.d.b). For this reason, ineligible individuals cannot legally bypass mandated state laws by traveling to states with less-restrictive gun control frameworks, acquiring firearms there from unlicensed sellers, and returning to their home states with them. Such conduct is illegal and resembles purchases on the black market.

That said, the article explores the implementation of gun laws belonging to the self-sufficient set in Missouri, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois (see Table 2 for a detailed description of each analyzed measure). Notably, Missouri and Illinois modified their gun control frameworks during the observed period. While the former revoked its mandate on acquiring concealed handgun carry licenses in 2016 and implemented permitless carry in 2017, the latter mandated ERPOs in 2019. Not only does the article acknowledge those changes, it also further elaborates on Illinois' establishment of ERPOs in the discussion section.

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<sup>5</sup> The permits must be issued: 1) within the previous five years in the state in which the transfer is to take place and 2) after a background check by an authorized government official.

<sup>6</sup> While federally licensed firearm dealers represent individuals engaging in business concerning manufacturing, importation, and interstate/intrastate sales of firearms and ammunition, unlicensed sellers are ordinary people selling or transferring their legally owned ones (Glover, 2019).



**Table 2: The analyzed gun laws**

Gun law	Description
<b>Firearm licensing</b>	Allows licensees to buy, own, possess, or carry firearms based on meeting several requirements, e.g., a background check or safety training.
<b>PTP law</b>	Issued by a state or local law enforcement agency after the would-be buyer passes a background check to purchase a firearm legally from an unlicensed seller.
<b>CAP laws</b>	Impose a penalty on gun owners failing to secure unattended firearms and leaving them in places accessible to children. Also, it specifies requirements for firearm storage.
<b>ERPOs</b>	Empower state courts to temporarily confiscate guns if individuals are at provable risk of harming themselves or others.
<b>RTC laws</b>	State the requirements on concealed firearm carry from the least restrictive to the strictest: permitless*, shall issue**, may issue***, and no issue****.

**Notes:**

\* No license is required to carry concealed handguns.

\*\* The issuing authority awards the permit if applicants objectively meet specified requirements, e.g., proof of residency in the state, a minimum age, fingerprints for a background check, no record of mental illness or committed felony, or proof or certification from an acceptable handgun safety class.

\*\*\* The issuing authority or official is bestowed with the discretion to grant or deny the permit based on the guidance of various statutory factors. Even if applicants comply with the determined requirements, the official is not obligated to issue the permit.

\*\*\*\* Concealed handgun carry is prohibited as no legal provision allows it (USCCA n.d.).

**Source:** *Giffords Law Center n.d.b*

### ***Operationalization of firearm mortality***

To quantify firearm mortality rates, the article adopts the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) age-adjusted annual firearm mortality rates per 100,000 people from 2015 to 2021, available on the CDC Wonder database. Not only does it focus on overall firearm mortality, which includes unintentional deaths, but also its two subcategories, i.e., suicides and homicides, to distinguish between the expected outcome of the analyzed gun laws.

### ***The expected empirical effect of the observed gun laws on firearm mortality***

What should the expected empirical effect of the observed gun laws on firearm mortality be according to the above-discussed scholarly findings? To answer the question, it is important to perceive the matter from two perspectives. While the first regards their combined implementation, the second concerns the expected outcome of each gun law on rates of firearm homicides and suicides, respectively. From a broader perspective reflecting our empirical knowledge, the more observed self-sufficient gun laws a state mandates, the lower firearm mortality it should annually experience, and vice versa. Nevertheless, imposing background checks through firearm licensing or PTP preconditions lower firearm mortality. In other words, should one state mandate ERPOs, CAP laws, and strict RTC laws, its total firearm mortality would likely be higher than the results of the state subjecting purchases from unlicensed sellers by passing a background check.

Looking at each gun law, they should impact firearm homicides and suicides as follows, according to the existing literature. Mandating a background check on purchases from unlicensed sellers is believed to affect both subcategories, as its nature is embedded in protecting not only prospective gun owners but also people living in their proximity. Also, CAP laws should similarly impact firearm homicides and suicides. In contrast, mandating ERPOs and RTC laws is expected to influence only one subcategory; whereas the former should initiate a decrease in firearm suicides, the latter is associated with increases in firearm homicides should its lenient, i.e., permitless carry provision, be adopted.

### **Research limitations**

Before diving into the findings, it is necessary to acknowledge two limiting factors bound to the analysis despite its methodological rigor. Although the adopted research design and case selection should have kept constant as many extraneous and confounding variables as possible, it is plausible that some intervening factors might have influenced the observed annual firearm mortality rates. In other words, as much as people's life stories differ, motivations for misusing guns also significantly vary. What compels person A to shoot himself or someone else may have little or no impact on person B or C. That said, one may suggest that a unique causal mechanism precedes every gun death. Moreover, researchers observing this phenomenon must remember that the United States is an outlier compared to other Western countries due to the enormous number of firearms circulating in its territory. Of those, some likely originate in the black market, and therefore, deaths caused by those guns are not affected by implemented gun laws. Consequently, one must carefully interpret the discovered empirical reality as official firearm mortality rates published by the CDC do not distinguish between deaths caused by legally or illegally acquired guns.

Besides, while MSSD proved its ability to identify the critical differences between policy outcomes of the five observed states, the article could not further elaborate on the findings to establish causal mechanisms connecting the analyzed gun laws with firearm mortality.

## **Findings**

### **Total firearm mortality**

After analyzing the collected data, several differences were discovered. Looking at both edges of the findings, the most striking contrast, i.e., 8.9 average firearm deaths per 100,000 people, was found between Missouri and Illinois. While the former mandated no analyzed gun law since 2017 due to the revocation of the state's mandate on concealed handgun carry licenses, the latter imposed the most robust gun control framework of the observed states. Illinois not only required gun owners to have a firearm license<sup>7</sup> but also mandated CAP laws, ERPOs (from 2019), and concealed handgun licenses. Before jumping to conclusions, one must consider that Ohio experienced, on average, 7.3 gun deaths per 100,000 people fewer than Missouri despite having an almost identical gun control framework—the only difference was that the former required gun owners to obtain a concealed handgun

<sup>7</sup> Prospective gun owners must obtain a valid FOID card to purchase and own firearms, which is preconditioned by several requirements, among others, a background check.

carry license. Considering this evidence, it is unlikely that this instrument alone would have caused such a wide disparity between both. Hence, it seems reasonable to anticipate that Missouri might be an outlier in the comparison.

Focusing on Illinois' robust gun control framework vis-à-vis other more lenient ones, the article moves to the case of Michigan. Although the latter implemented handgun PTP and concealed handgun licenses, its average firearm mortality during the observed period was 0.7 gun-related deaths per 100,000 people higher than Illinois'. Also, Ohio underlines such contrary evidence regarding the anticipated differences between strict and lenient gun control frameworks. Even though it imposed solely concealed handgun carry licenses, Ohio only experienced 1.6 more annual gun deaths per 100,000 people than Illinois. In contrast, Indiana fell behind Ohio despite having ERPOs mandated. Compared to Illinois, it accounted for, on average, 3.2 more firearm deaths per 100,000 people annually.

### ***Firearm suicides***

Moving from the total firearm mortality to suicides, the discovered evidence predominantly operated as expected. Not only did Illinois' robust gun control framework prove to be the most effective in preventing them, as it experienced, on average, 4.1 cases per 100,000 people annually, Michigan's environment embedded in its PTP also affirmed the assumption because it accounted for 7.0 gun suicides per 100,000 people on average a year. Regarding the other states, Ohio and Indiana are worth paying attention to. Had the empirical reality worked according to the expected assumption, the latter's rates would have been lower than the former's due to its implemented ERPOs. However, Indiana's average firearm suicide rate was, on average, 1.0 higher per 100,000 people than Ohio's, which had implemented no gun law intended to protect its population from firearm suicides. Notably, Missouri confirmed its outlier position because it fell remarkably behind Ohio, the state with almost identical gun laws, as Missouri experienced, on average, 3.2 firearm suicides per 100,000 people more annually.

What is notable about Illinois, whose gun control framework operated according to the empirical assumption, is that any prospective gun owner must obtain a valid FOID to purchase a handgun or long gun from unlicensed sellers. To do so, the Illinois State Police conducts a background check to investigate, among others, whether the applicant has not been treated for a mental illness within the past five years. Indeed, Michigan's authorities also inspect the mental health history of each prospective gun owner as a part of its handgun PTP; however, it seems likely that a combination of firearm licensing, CAP laws, and ERPOs may have created a rigorous environment responsible for Illinois' low annual firearm suicide rates.

### ***Firearm homicides***

While the findings regarding firearm suicides operated as the empirical assumption had predicted, firearm homicides unveiled quite the opposite evidence. As much as Illinois' robust gun control framework championed within the former, it quite remarkably failed in the latter's case. Its annual results not only fell behind those of Michigan but also Ohio and even Indiana—the difference was, on average, 2.0, 1.8, and 1.5 firearm homicides per 100,000 people, respectively. What is striking is that Ohio, having no analyzed gun law mandated

other than concealed handgun carry licenses, experienced lower gun-related homicides than Illinois. Moreover, on average, the latter encountered 2.0 fewer cases than Missouri. Indeed, such a difference remains relatively wide at first sight; however, juxtaposing gun control frameworks in both states is like comparing apples and oranges. Also, it is notable that Michigan experienced 4.0 fewer firearm homicides per 100,000 people on average than Missouri. That said, the discovered reality weakens the initial empirical assumption according to which Illinois should have encountered the lowest number of firearm homicides.

Such reasoning was also underlined by a Michigan-Ohio comparison. Although the former mandated a handgun PTP, the difference between them was, on average, only 0.2 gun homicides per 100,000 people. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the handgun PTP significantly prevented firearm homicides in Michigan.

**Table 3: Results of the analysis.**

	Missouri	Michigan	Indiana	Ohio	Illinois
<b>Firearm licensing</b>	No	No	No	No	Yes
<b>PTP laws</b>	No	Yes*	No	No	-**
<b>CAP laws</b>	No	No	No	No	Yes
<b>ERPOs</b>	No	No	Yes	No	Yes***
<b>RTC laws</b>	Permitless****	Shall-issue	Shall-issue	Shall-issue	Shall-issue
<b>Average total firearm mortality (2015 – 2021)</b>	21.1	12.9	15.4	13.8	12.2
<b>Average firearm suicides (2015 – 2021)</b>	10.8	7.0	8.6	7.6	4.1
<b>Average firearm homicides (2015 – 2021)</b>	9.7	5.7	6.2	5.9	7.7

**Notes:**

\* Imposed only on handgun purchases.

\*\* Not evaluated as its firearm licensing already includes background checks.

\*\*\* Effective since January 1, 2019.

\*\*\*\* From January 1, 2017, Missouri did not require concealed handgun carry licenses.

**Source:** *own processing.*

## Discussion

### *Implications for gun control policy*

Did the empirical reality in Missouri, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois correspond with the expected assumptions? Yes and no. The most striking evidence of the findings was associated with the latter’s gun control framework. Although it operated expectedly regarding firearm suicides, as Illinois experienced significantly lower annual rates than its Midwestern counterparts, it failed to achieve similar results in terms of firearm homicides. Not only did Illinois fall remarkably behind Michigan and Ohio, but also Indiana. As for the latter two, their firearm mortality rates also provide contrary evidence to the assumption. Not only did Ohio’s lenient gun control framework indicate similar results to Michigan’s, mandating handgun PTP, but Indiana’s ERPOs also did not seem to significantly impact its firearm

mortality, as only Missouri accounted for a higher number of gun deaths. That said, what does this evidence mean?

First and foremost, the article rejects the short-sighted perception of gun advocates, promoting the ineffectiveness of some gun laws like background checks (NRA-ILA, n.d.). Indeed, this instrument has faced academic criticism; however, the article aligns with Moorhouse and Wanner (2006), proposing that the fundamental element differentiating the United States from other Western countries lies in the number of circulating firearms in the country and the nature of the majority of existing gun control frameworks on the state level regarding the purchasing process. In their view, guns should be perceived as “long-lived capital assets,” uncontrollably circulating among various owners. Not only are firearms inherited from generation to generation, they are also bought and sold, traded, parted out, and given away without any restraint if states do not mandate firearm licensing, PTP on purchase from unlicensed sellers, or any measure regulating gun transfers between private parties (Ibid. 121). Such reasoning supports the argument proposed by Ridgeway et al. (2008), suggesting that almost every crime gun in the United States originates in the legal market.

As noted in the article’s introduction, more than 393 million guns are believed to exist in the United States today (Ingraham, 2018). Considering such quantity, one cannot underestimate the possible role of the black market in satisfying firearm demand. Imagine a wrongdoer seeking a gun to commit a crime. Would such a person abide by the existing laws and acquire it from federally licensed dealers after passing a background check? Not likely. Unlike law-abiding citizens, it seems logical to assume that criminals are likely to violate them, as they intend to break the law anyway. Despite the little academic knowledge on this matter, the United States Department of Justice’s special report on the origin of crime guns, conducted by Alper and Glaze (2019), provides the first empirical insight. Of the 287,400 interviewed state and federal prisoners who had guns when committing their offense, only 7% purchased them from a federally licensed firearm dealer and underwent a background check. In contrast, more than a half had either stolen it (6%), found it at a crime scene (7%), received it from a family member, friend, or as a gift (25%), and, critically, acquired it off the street or from the black market (43%). Such evidence might support Knight’s concern about illegal firearm import from states with weaker gun control frameworks into those with stricter ones. Applying this reasoning to the analyzed Midwestern states, ineligible individuals from Illinois and Michigan might travel to Missouri or Indiana in the case of the former and Indiana and Ohio regarding the latter to acquire guns, as neither neighboring state requires passing a background check before a purchase from an unlicensed seller. However, as noted above, that only applies to in-state sales, not interstate ones. Therefore, such conduct equals acquiring guns from the black market, as direct interstate transfers from unlicensed sellers are illegal under federal law.

Considering the results proposed by Alper and Glaze, it seems reasonable to assume that one must distinguish between two coexisting firearm environments when observing the relationship between gun laws and firearm mortality. While state or federal measures seem to have the power to impact the official dimension, the black market appears reasonably resilient to any legislative change. Also, the conspicuous problem is that firearms may circulate from one to another. In other words, even if guns are initially purchased from federally licensed firearm dealers, they can be resold afterward without conducting a background check between private parties. As the so-called time-to-crime metric indicates, it is often only a matter of time until such a legally acquired firearm becomes a crime gun.

For this reason, the academic community and policymakers should pay particular attention to the black market's role in satisfying firearm demand. As Illinois showed, even a robust gun control framework cannot prevent firearm homicides. Compared to Ohio, the state with almost Missouri-like gun laws, the former exceeded the latter in the rates of firearm homicides every year during the observed period. Therefore, this evidence points to the black market as the likely catalyst of Illinois' poor results.

In contrast, firearm suicides indicate quite the opposite pattern. Not only did Illinois' vigorous gun control framework match the lowest rates of gun-related suicides, Michigan also accounted for their second-lowest number. Although future research is necessary to establish a causal mechanism between each analyzed gun law and firearm suicides, the article aligns with other scholars considering a comprehensive gun control framework and background checks as a precondition to low firearm suicide rates (Conner & Zhong, 2003; Miller et al., 2006; Andrés & Hempstead, 2011; Fleegler et al., 2013; Kposowa, 2016; Alban et al., 2018; Saadi et al., 2020; Paul & Coakley, 2023). Notwithstanding, it is vital to urge future studies also to pay close attention to non-firearm suicide categories when exploring decreasing gun-related suicides, which might solely transfer to the former, as Ghiani et al. (2019) argued.

Discussing firearm suicides, it is worth paying attention to ERPOs to contribute to the debate over this instrument's effectiveness (Swanson et al., 2017; Kivisto & Phalen, 2018; Swanson et al., 2019; Rowhani-Rahbar et al., 2020; Pear et al., 2022). To do so, the comparison between Indiana and Ohio is particularly appropriate because both states required similar gun laws except for the former's ERPOs. Had the discovered evidence been congruent with the empirical assumption, the former would have accounted for far lower rates of firearm suicides. Notwithstanding, the reality was quite the opposite, as Ohio constantly experienced lower average rates during the observed period. For this reason, ERPOs seem unlikely to significantly prevent firearm suicides. Furthermore, this reasoning is supported by Illinois' implementation of ERPOs in 2019. Indeed, its firearm suicides decreased by 0.2 and 0.1 per 100,000 people during the next two years; however, Illinois experienced a 0.7 per 100,000 people higher rate in 2021 compared to 2018—the last year without the ERPOs. Nevertheless, future longitudinal research must continue to observe its effect on firearm suicides, as this measure remains relatively new.

Knowing the Midwestern empirical reality, the 'million-dollar question' is what might help solve the status quo. Although gun laws seem effective in reducing firearm suicides, the rate of gun-related homicides appear resilient to federal and state legislative changes. Indeed, traditional measures influencing firearm access and use bear some fruit, as they deprive some dangerous individuals of gun ownership; however, the same people may acquire firearms from 'the street' due to the extreme quantity of guns in the United States. For this reason, researchers and policymakers should start looking beyond such measures to those reducing the number of available firearms and improving living conditions in disadvantaged communities, such as gun buybacks and community-building programs. The reason lies in the evidence indicating that their implementation alongside traditional measures may impact firearm mortality (Braga & Wintemute, 2013; Violano et al., 2014; Koper et al., 2015; Baumann et al., 2017; Carpenter et al., 2020; Branas et al., 2021; Hureau et al., 2022). Focusing on the former, although gun buybacks alone do not likely reduce firearm mortality, they can play a vital role in broader community-centered efforts to prevent gun violence by decreasing the number of available firearms. Also, they may represent an integral component of rigorous gun control frameworks as they intend to accomplish other

objectives like community mobilization or social cohesion. That said, implementing various community-oriented programs also seems to reduce firearm mortality. For example, Branas et al. (2021) linked every 10 additional such programs with a 9% decrease in firearm homicides and a 6% reduction in overall gun violence. While further research is needed to prove the empirical effectiveness of various programs ranging from youth development and career services to improving housing conditions and financial assistance, the article emphasizes the necessity of focusing on such initiatives to examine their real-life impact to develop alternative strategies that may help reduce firearm homicides.

## Conclusion

The relationship between gun laws and firearm mortality is blurred behind a cloud of uncertainties and potential influences. When observing it, it is vital to remember that what compels one person to pull the trigger may have little or no influence on another. Indeed, gun laws are rightly seen as the low firearm mortality precondition; however, the fundamental issue differentiating the United States from other Western countries lies in the enormous quantity of existing guns on its territory. For this reason, scholars and policymakers must distinguish between two coexisting firearm environments, i.e., the official and black market, when observing the link between gun laws and firearm mortality. As shown by the analysis, while firearm suicides seem to fall into the former, firearm homicides are likely bound to the latter. Therefore, academics should pay much closer attention to the impact of untraditional instruments, whose implementation might ideally support the established ones like firearm licensing or PTP.

In contrast, policymakers of both parties must finally bury the hatchet and find common ground to solve this almost endless gun violence epidemic, impacting so many Americans every year, once and for all. Leaving ideological differences aside, avoiding catchy slogans, and, most importantly, passing legislation reflecting empirical findings is the only way out of this deadly phenomenon. After all, the status quo has created the issue we are trying to solve nowadays.

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