

Analysis suggests gun permits may be more effective than background checks alone at reducing firearm homicides

August 1 2024



Credit: Karolina Grabowska from Pexels

Despite widespread support, laws enforcing universal background checks at the time of firearm purchase may not be enough to move the needle

on reducing shooting deaths in the United States.

A Tufts University School of Medicine study, published August 1 in the journal [JAMA Network Open](#), reports that states that require gun permits rather than relying solely on universal background checks see [firearm](#) homicide rates, on average, 18% lower than states with background check policies alone.

The analysis compared firearm homicide data from the 12 states with universal background check laws but no permit requirements (e.g., New York, Nevada, Vermont) and the seven states with gun permit laws (e.g., Massachusetts, California, Rhode Island) from 1976 to 2022.

States in the former group showed slight variations in firearm homicide rates while those with permit laws saw reductions in shooting deaths ranging from 2% to 32%.

"These findings cast doubt on the main strategy currently being used by gun violence prevention advocates and policymakers to reduce firearm fatalities," says study author Michael Siegel, a professor of [public health](#) and community medicine at the School of Medicine.

"If state lawmakers really want to reduce gun violence, the most effective policy they can enact is one that requires permits in order to purchase or possess a gun."

While research on universal background check laws shows that they are associated with decreases in firearm homicides, most of this work has not differentiated between policies requiring permits and those that do not. By separating them, two studies from [2018](#) and [2020](#) found early evidence that the success of universal background checks can be attributed to the permit laws.

These findings are further supported by Siegel's investigation, which compared [firearm death rates recorded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) to the State Firearm Law Database, a database he oversees at Tufts that aggregates and updates all state firearm legislation.

Siegel is not surprised that gun permits are associated with lower firearm fatalities. While requirements vary by state, permit laws typically require someone who wants to own a gun to go through a series of checks before granting authorization, valid for several years, to purchase firearms from various dealers.

The advantage of state permits is that their criminal databases are more consistently kept up to date and are more likely to record lower-level crimes, such as domestic battery or a DUI, compared to the federal databases used for universal background checks, which rely on states to track this data.

Universal background checks can fail when a request for a background check takes so long to come back that it has passed the window of time—72 hours—that a person can legally be kept waiting for a gun.

This loophole allows individuals with criminal records to make a firearm purchase by default. Background checks are also less effective when someone has recently committed a crime that disqualifies them from owning a gun, while permits can be immediately suspended.

"Some [gun owners](#) might hear this and say that permits are much more intrusive, but I want to emphasize it's actually a win-win, both for gun owners and public health," says Siegel.

He argues that gun owners on average have four or more firearms, so having a permit system makes it easier for them to make multiple

purchases over time because their permit wouldn't require them to get a background check for each exchange.

Siegel plans to continue exploring the emerging association between gun permit laws and firearm homicide rates, while also examining their impact on firearm suicides.

"One of the major implications of this research is that it supports changing the way we do things, such as encouraging all states to adopt reciprocal permitting systems, meaning a person with a gun permit in one state would be allowed to bring their license and gun legally into another state," says Siegel.

More information: Universal Background Checks, Permit Requirements, and Firearm Homicide Rates, *JAMA Network Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.25025](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.25025)

Provided by Tufts University

Citation: Analysis suggests gun permits may be more effective than background checks alone at reducing firearm homicides (2024, August 1) retrieved 1 August 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-08-analysis-gun-effective-background-firearm.html>

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