

Lax gun ownership laws could impact ability of high-risk individuals to purchase firearms

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Sixty percent of persons incarcerated for gun crimes in the thirteen U.S. states with the most lax standards for legal firearm ownership were not legally prohibited from possessing firearms when they committed the crime that led to their incarceration. According to the study by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 31 percent of these gun offenders were old enough to possess a firearm and had no prior disqualifying record. But 29 percent had criminal records or would have been too young to legally possess a firearm in states with the strictest standards for gun ownership.

Researchers analyzed data from the U.S. Department of Justice and the [Census Bureau's](#) 2004 Survey of Inmates in State [Correctional Facilities](#). The study appears in the online edition of the peer-reviewed journal [Injury Prevention](#).

"Our findings indicate that more stringent restrictions on firearm possession in states with the lowest standards would have made firearm possession illegal for many individuals who went on to commit a crime with a gun," said Katherine Vittes, PhD, MPH, lead author of the study, a faculty member of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, and a research associate with the Bloomberg School's Department of Health Policy and Management. "It may be especially important to focus on laws that raise the legal age of handgun possession to 21 because many gun offenders are between 18 and 20 years old. Such laws are currently in place in five states."

The study also found that only 4 percent of offenders who were prohibited from purchasing or possessing a firearm under current law obtained their gun from a licensed dealer, compared with 20 percent of non-prohibited offenders. Almost all offenders who were legally prohibited from possessing a firearm acquired their gun from a supplier not required to do a criminal background check under federal or state law.

"That so many who committed gun crimes serious enough to lead to their [incarceration](#) in a state prison obtained their guns from sellers not required to keep records or verify the legal status of the buyer underscores the need to address loopholes in current gun policies," said Daniel Webster, ScD, MPH, co-author of the study, co-director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, and a professor with the Bloomberg School's Department of [Health Policy](#) and Management.

"Legal status and source of offenders' firearms in states with the least stringent criteria for [gun ownership](#)" was written by Katherine A. Vittes, Jon S. Vernick, and Daniel W. Webster.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

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