

Pandemic gun-buying binge crosses party lines

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A fear for health and safety that crosses party lines has driven a record

number of American gun sales during the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests, raising the potential for accidental deaths and the need to address gun safety and mental health, UC Riverside economists suggest in a new paper.

According to the FBI, a record-setting 3.7 million firearm [background checks](#) were completed in March 2020, the month COVID-19 shutdowns began in the United States. This record was shattered only a few months later as protests for racial justice following the police murder of George Floyd rocked the nation, leading to 3.9 million firearm background checks.

Bree Lang and Matthew Lang, associate professors of teaching in economics, used state-level background check data from 1999 to June 2020 to compare the current surge in gun buying with previous surges. They found background checks increased 43% in the early stages of the pandemic and 47% during the protests.

"The record surge in firearm sales during such a unique time has the potential to lead to increases in gun violence," Matthew Lang said.

The increases in background checks over this period were four to six times larger than the increase in background checks following widely reported mass shootings with 10 or more people killed. The authors argue that unlike previous surges, the current increases were not driven by potential changes in [gun policies](#) often discussed in the aftermath of mass shootings.

The researchers also show there was no statistical difference in the surge in background checks between Republican-leaning and Democrat-leaning states. This differs from November months during election years and months following mass shootings. Following these events, background checks increased significantly more in Republican states due

to uncertainty about changes to gun laws, a subject of great concern to many Republican party members. These findings reinforced the idea that firearm enthusiasts worried about changes in gun policies were not driving the increased sales in 2020.

The economists argue that the rush to buy guns is concerning because quarantine fatigue and social problems are taking a toll on Americans' mental health. The Los Angeles Times reported more than 41% adults nationwide have symptoms of clinical anxiety or depression, compared to 11% a year ago.

"It has been shown that waiting periods reduce suicides," Matthew Lang said. "One solution would be to apply waiting periods, or cooling off periods as they are sometimes called, evenly across the board to all firearm purchases."

"We've never really dealt with a surge like this before," Bree Lang said. "The issue of gun policy is more divisive now than it was 20 years ago, but we need policies to address the health and safety of people buying all these guns, and that of the people they live with."

The authors suggest expanding background checks could help, but they note the background check process is not uniform across all states. They also recommend governments implement more comprehensive [gun safety](#) education, expand [mental health](#) assessment and treatment, and reduce the stigma associated with mental illness.

The paper, "Pandemics, protests and firearms," is under review at the *American Journal of Health Economics*. It is available on the preprint server SSRN.

More information: Bree J. Lang et al. Firearm Sales and the COVID-19 Pandemic, *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2020). [DOI:](#)

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