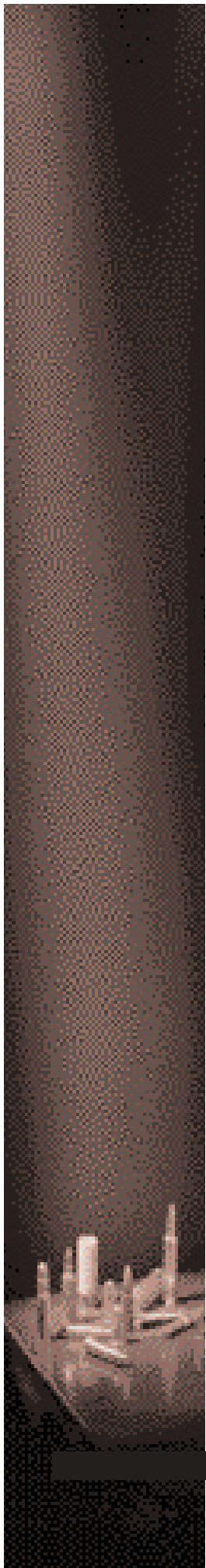


Section III

# Terminology and Resources





S P O T L I G H T   O N   D E P I C T I O N   O F   H E A L T H   A N D   S O C I A L   I S S U E S

## Chapter 13

# Glossary

## Firearm Terms

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**ACTION:** The working mechanism of the handgun. This determines the process by which the handgun is cocked, fired, and reloaded.

**AIRGUN:** Guns that utilize the power of compressed air to launch a projectile. The air pressure needed to launch the projectile is often generated by a disposable CO2 cartridge, a compressed spring or by a manual pump mechanism. Often these type of guns fire pellets or BBs. These are not firearms.

**AMMUNITION:** A plural term referring to multiple fully assembled cartridges which are ready to be fired.

**ASSAULT WEAPON:** A term generally referring to guns that have most or all of the following characteristics: unusually high ammunition capacity, rapid rate of fire, and semi-automatic mode of action. A handgun, rifle, or shotgun having these characteristics may be considered an assault weapon.

**AUTOMATIC WEAPONS:** Fully automatic weapons, sometimes referred to as “machine gear”, which continue to fire bullets for as long as the trigger is depressed and ammunition remains in the gun or in an attached feeder. Semi-automatic weapons fire only one bullet each time the trigger is pulled, but do load another bullet into firing position automatically.

**BB GUN:** See “airgun” above.

**BACKGROUND CHECK:** An examination of official records to determine whether a prospective gun purchaser is prohibited by local, state, or federal law from possessing or purchasing a firearm. The federal Brady Law and numerous state laws require gun dealers to contact law enforcement agencies for a background check on people who want to purchase firearms. Some state laws require background checks for handgun purchases only, while others require them for any firearm purchases. The federal Brady Law requires background checks for handgun and long gun purchases and only applies to sales by federally licensed dealers. Federal law does not require background checks for sales between private individuals, though some state laws do. Complete background checks are often difficult because there is no readily accessible database listing many of the categories of persons who are prohibited from purchasing firearms.

**BARREL:** A tube of varying length through which the bullet is discharged. Discharging the bullet through the barrel determines the bullet’s initial direction and trajectory. The seal created between the bullet and the surface of the barrel keeps the gas produced by the burning gunpowder trapped behind the bullet once it leaves the cartridge case. As a result, the bullet continues to accelerate until it exits the handgun at the muzzle. Thus, the longer the barrel, the higher the velocity achieved by the bullet.

*Most glossary terms and definitions courtesy of the Firearm Injury Center, Dept. of Emergency Medicine, Medical College of Wisconsin and the Center for Gun Policy and Research, Johns Hopkins University. See the “Technical Resources” section for contact information.*

Additionally, modern handgun barrels are rifled, which causes the bullet to spin, giving it more stability in flight.

**BLANK:** A cartridge that does not contain a bullet. However, it does contain powder and a primer. When ignited, a blank cartridge can expel high-pressure gas and potentially cause injury.

**BORE:** The interior diameter of a gun's barrel.

**BRADY LAW:** A 1993 law named after former press secretary James Brady who was shot and seriously wounded in an assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan. It requires the establishment of a national instant background check system to be used by firearm licensees before transferring any firearm to a non-licensed individual.

**BRASS:** A synonym for cartridge case. Most cartridge cases are made of brass.

**BREECH:** The area of the handgun that contains the mechanical action, the chamber and the attachment of the barrel to the frame.

**BULLET:** The projectile discharged from the cartridge of a handgun. Traditionally, these are made of lead, although other materials may be used. Bullets are manufactured in a wide variety of shapes and weights, each designed to have specific characteristics in flight, on impact with the target, and after penetrating the target.

**BUREAU OF ALCOHOL, TOBACCO AND FIREARMS (ATF):** A division of the Treasury Department that has the authority to regulate many aspects of the firearm market. ATF is responsible for licensing firearms dealers, controlling the importation of firearms, and tracking firearm production.

**BUTT:** The rear portion of the frame onto which the grip is attached.

**CALIBER:** The size of the bullet used in a particular handgun, which is determined by the diameter of the bullet, measured either in millimeters or in hundredths of an inch.

**CAP LAWS:** See Child Access Prevention Laws.

**CARTRIDGE:** A single fully assembled round of ammunition.

**CASING (OR CARTRIDGE CASE):** The outer container of a cartridge (often made of brass) that holds the primer, gunpowder, and bullet. As the gunpowder burns, the case expands to seal against the side of the chamber, forcing the expansion of gas down the barrel.

**CENTER-FIRE:** A type of cartridge in which the primer is located in the center of the casing's base. To fire this type of cartridge, the firing pin must impact in the center of the casing's base.

**CHAMBER:** The portion of the handgun that holds the cartridge during discharge. The chamber is located directly behind the rifled portion of the barrel. Pistols have a single chamber (an integral portion of the barrel), and the empty casing must be removed and replaced with a new cartridge before another shot can be fired. Depending on the mechanism of action, this process is done either automatically (in the case of semi-automatic pistols) or manually (in the case of Derringers and some single shot competition-style pistols). In contrast, revolvers contain multiple chambers (that are not an integral part of the barrel), each holding a single cartridge, which rotate into the firing position behind a single barrel.

**CHILD ACCESS PREVENTION LAWS:** State or local laws, also referred to as "CAP laws" or safe-storage laws, that require adults to store their firearms so that children are less likely to gain access to them. Typically, CAP laws require adults to store firearms and ammunition separately or to use a lock box or trigger lock.

**CONCEALED CARRY LAW:** Laws that define the conditions under which individuals may carry a concealed weapon in public. Concealed carry laws are generally state, not federal laws. All states, except Vermont, either require some sort of license or permit for carrying a concealed weapon in public or forbid concealed carry. Concealed carry laws have no effect on an individual's ability to have a firearm in his or her home. These laws provide for permits or licenses to be issued under one of two general

types of systems: “may issue” (law enforcement can exercise discretion about who gets licensed, usually based on a demonstration of need) or “shall issue” (law enforcement must issue licenses to all qualified applicants.)

**CONSUMER PROTECTION REGULATION:** Rules that govern consumer products. Although Congress has specifically forbidden the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (the federal agency with authority to regulate the safety of most consumer products) from regulating the safety of firearms, state attorneys general may have the authority to regulate guns as consumer products.

**CYLINDER:** The rotating drum, found on revolvers, which contains multiple chambers. Most commonly, a cylinder will contain six chambers, but some are made with as many as ten. When a revolver is discharged, the cylinder can be manually rotated to bring the next chamber in line with the barrel.

**FACTORING CRITERIA:** Size and safety specifications for imported pistols and revolvers established by the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms under the provisions of the Gun Control Act of 1968. These factoring criteria are intended to identify those firearms that are not “particularly suitable for or readily adaptable to sporting purposes.”

**FEDERAL FIREARMS LICENSEE (FFL):** Any person, partnership, or business entity holding a valid license issued by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms pursuant to the Gun Control Act of 1968, that allows them to “engage in the business” of manufacturing, dealing importing, repairing, or pawn-brokering firearms. By law, all FFLs must keep records of sales and other transfers of firearms to non-licensed persons. These records, however, are not transferred to the government, unless the FFL goes out of business. FFLs may legally buy firearms directly from wholesalers with no waiting period or background check.

**FELON IN POSSESSION:** A violator of Federal and state laws forbidding individuals convicted of most felonies to purchase or possess a firearm. Violation of these laws is itself a criminal offense.

**FFL:** See Federal Firearms Licensee.

**FIREARM:** A device which launches a projectile using the energy generated by the burning of gunpowder.

**FIREARM OWNERS PROTECTION ACT OF 1986:** See Registration

**FIREARMS DEALER:** Someone engaged in the business of selling firearms. Under federal law, such a person must obtain a federal firearms license (FFL). The term “unlicensed firearms dealer” refers to persons who are (illegally) engaged in the business of selling guns but have no FFL.

**FIRING PIN:** A pin that transfers the energy generated by the hammer to the primer. The firing pin lies behind the cartridge. The impact of the firing pin on the cartridge ignites the primer and causes the powder to burn rapidly, thus discharging the bullet.

**FRAME:** The basic structure or housing, also known as the receiver, to which the other components of a firearm are attached.

**FULL METAL JACKET:** A term referring to the layer of copper completely enveloping a bullet.

**GRIP:** The point at which the user holds the handgun during use. Grips are usually made of wood, rubber, or synthetic materials, and can be custom-designed to fit the user’s hand. The grip is generally an integral part of the frame.

**GUN CONTROL:** A generic term used to describe many different measures that affect which guns can be owned, who may own them, and how they may be used. In the United States, many gun control measures are aimed at keeping guns out of the hands of certain categories of high-risk people, including felons and minors, while preserving other individuals’ ability to acquire guns. Some gun control efforts focus on firearms thought to pose special risks, like “Saturday Night Specials” (see Saturday Night Special).

**GUN CONTROL ACT OF 1968:** The primary federal law governing who may buy and sell firearms. It provides that persons who are engaged in the business of selling firearms must

obtain a dealer's license and establishes categories of persons, like convicted felons, who may not purchase or possess firearms.

**GUNPOWDER (OR POWDER):** A mixture of chemical compounds that burns rapidly to generate a gas when ignited by the primer. The production of gas dramatically increases the pressure inside the cartridge. Once the pressure reaches a threshold (determined by the way the cartridge is manufactured), the bullet is discharged from the casing. Wide variations exist in the size and shape of gunpowder particles, each providing different performance characteristics.

**GUN SHOW:** Gun shows are short-term (usually 1 or 2 day) events held at indoor or outdoor locations, such as meeting halls and fairgrounds, where unlicensed "hobbyists" and "collectors", as well as Federal Firearms Licensees, show and offer firearms and ammunition for sale. Federally licensed dealers are permitted to make sales at gun shows held in their state.

**GUN SHOW LOOPHOLE:** The legal situation that allows buyers to purchase guns from vendors at gun shows or fairs without having to undergo a background check, which is required if buying from licensed firearm dealers (see Background Check).

**GUN TRAFFICKING (INTERSTATE):** The process by which traffickers legally buy multiple guns in states with permissive gun laws, then transport them to states with more restrictive gun laws, where they sell the guns illegally.

**HAMMER:** The mechanism that generates the energy needed to ignite the primer and fire the bullet. When the hammer is pulled back into the cocked position, it compresses the mainspring, thus generating potential energy. When the trigger is pulled, the potential energy stored in the mainspring is released, forcing the hammer down onto the firing pin. The kinetic energy generated as the hammer falls is transferred through the firing pin to the cartridge.

**HANDGUN:** According to federal and most state laws, a gun designed to be held with one

hand, with a relatively short barrel and grip. This distinguishes them from long guns, such as rifles and shotguns, designed generally to be operated with both hands.

**INTEGRATED BALLISTIC IDENTIFICATION SYSTEM (IBIS):** A computerized system operated by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms' (ATF) which compiles digitalized images of fired bullets and expended cartridge cases. These images can be matched to identify bullets and casings fired from the same gun but recovered from different crime scenes.

**JACKET:** The metal covering of a lead bullet. Fully jacketed and semi-jacketed bullets have performance characteristics that are different from simple lead bullets.

**JUNK GUNS:** See "Saturday Night Special".

**LONG GUN:** Firearms with long barrels, like rifles and shotguns, as opposed to handguns.

**KITCHEN TABLE DEALER:** A term used to describe gun dealers who sell firearms from their homes and do not have a commercial store.

**MAGAZINE:** A container that holds cartridges and feeds them automatically into the chamber of semi-automatic pistols. Often the magazine is a removable component which inserts into the grip of the pistol. The capacity of the magazine can vary greatly. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, however, limited the magazine capacity of handguns to a maximum of 10 cartridges (part of the so-called "assault weapon ban").

**MAINSRING:** The initial source of the energy needed to fire the gun. Cocking the hammer compresses the mainspring, generating potential energy.

**MINORS' ACCESS TO GUNS:** Firearm access by persons under the age of 18. Many state laws prohibit minors from purchasing and/or possessing firearms. Some states allow exceptions if the minor's parents have given the minor permission to possess a firearm. Federal law prohibits anyone from selling a handgun or handgun ammunition to anyone under the age of 18 and prohibits anyone under the age

of 18 from possessing a handgun or handgun ammunition unless it is in the course of employment or with parental permission. Absent state law to the contrary, those over age 18 but under age 21 may legally buy a handgun or handgun ammunition only from someone who is not a federally licensed dealer.

**MUZZLE:** The end of the barrel from which the bullet exits.

**ONE GUN PER MONTH LAW:** Statutes designed to reduce interstate trafficking of firearms by limiting sales of handguns to one per customer per month. Currently, four states (California, Maryland, South Carolina, and Virginia) have this law, though with some limited exceptions.

**PERMIT TO PURCHASE:** A permit issued by state or local law enforcement authorities that grants permission to receive, purchase, or possess a firearm. In most states with permit to purchase laws, it is a crime to receive, purchase or possess a firearm without the permit.

**PERSONALIZED GUN:** Guns designed to be fired only by an authorized user, such as those requiring a pin number or an identifying code ring worn by the owner to unlock the system. (See Safety Devices - Built In section.)

**PISTOL:** Technically, a weapon synonymous with a handgun, meaning a hand-held firearm of any type. Usually the word is used to refer to all handguns except revolvers, but it can have multiple meanings depending on the context.

**POWDER:** See Gun Powder.

**PRIMER:** The ignition component of the cartridge. Impact of the firing pin onto the primer causes it to explode, igniting the gunpowder.

**PRIVATE SELLER:** Someone who is not a Federal Firearms Licensee (dealer) and therefore not subject to any federal, state, and local laws applicable to firearms transfers to nonlicensees. A few states, however, require that sales of guns by private sellers are subject to the same background check as sales by licensed dealers.

**REGISTRATION:** The act of recording the owner of an item, such as a car or a firearm. As part of the Firearm Owners Protection Act of 1986, Congress specifically forbade the federal government from establishing or maintaining a national registry of firearms and their owners.

**REVOLVER:** A handgun with a revolving cylinder containing several cartridges so that it can be fired in quick succession without reloading.

**RIFLE:** A type of long gun, a shoulder firearm with spiral grooves cut in the inner surface of the gun barrel to give the bullet a rotatory motion and thus render its flight more accurate.

**RIFLING:** A set of parallel spiraling grooves that run the length of the interior of the barrel. The grooves cause the bullet to spin as it passes, thus giving it additional stability and accuracy in flight.

**RIMFIRE:** A type of cartridge in which the primer is located along the outer rim of the casing's base. To fire this type of cartridge, the firing pin must impact on this outer rim.

**SAFE-STORAGE LAW:** See Child Access Prevention Law.

**SATURDAY NIGHT SPECIAL:** Cheap, poorly made, easily concealable, short-barreled handguns, also known as "junk guns," that are disproportionately involved in crime. Most cannot be imported into the United States because they would fail the design and performance tests applicable to guns manufactured abroad and imported into the United States. The majority of those produced in the United States are manufactured by a group of manufacturers in the Los Angeles area, referred to as the "Ring of Fire."

**SECOND AMENDMENT:** An amendment to the United States Constitution that reads in its entirety: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

**SENTENCE ENHANCEMENT:** The imposition of a prison sentence longer than it other-

wise would be for a crime. Crimes committed with a firearm are often subject to imposition of a prison sentence above and beyond that for the underlying offense, such as robbery.

**SERIAL NUMBER:** Individual identification required of gun manufacturers and importers by Federal regulations for each gun made.

**SHOTGUN:** A smoothbore gun used for firing a charge of small shot (solid projectile like pellets, as distinguished from explosive shells, i.e., bullets) at short range, as in hunting small game.

**SIDEARM:** Weapons that may be worn at the side or at the waist.

**SILENCER:** A device that can be attached to a handgun to reduce the sound of the bullet's discharge.

**SLIDE:** A device that surrounds the barrel on semi-automatic handguns. As its name implies, the slide moves backwards, opening the breech area of the handgun. Also, on many semi-automatic pistols, the backward movement of the slide cocks the hammer. When the gun is fired, some of the energy from the discharge of the bullet is used to push the slide backwards, thus opening the breech to expel the empty cartridge case and recocking the hammer for the next shot.

**STRAW PURCHASER/ STRAW MAN PURCHASER:** A qualified purchaser who purchases a firearm for someone who is forbidden by law to purchase that firearm. It is illegal for a firearms dealer to sell a gun to a person who the dealer has reason to know is acting as a straw purchaser. Straw purchaser schemes are one way that convicted felons and youth acquire guns.

**TRACING:** Use of the serial number and other identifying information of a gun to track a recovered crime gun from its source (manu-

facturer and/or importer) through the chain of distribution (wholesale and retail) to the individual(s) who procured the firearm. Firearm tracing information helps law enforcement identify criminal suspects, establish whether a firearm is stolen, and prove its ownership. Information acquired from crime gun tracing is also used by law enforcement to identify interstate traffickers, straw purchasers, and gun dealers who make illegal sales.

**TRIGGER GUARD:** A loop of metal that extends down from the frame and encircles the trigger. It is designed to prevent the trigger from snagging as the handgun is removed from or placed into a holster.

**TRIGGER LOCKS:** Locking devices that prevent a gun's trigger from pulling back and causing the gun to discharge. Models vary but most are keyed devices. Some are combination locks and some, when tampered with, sound an alarm. The quality of trigger locks vary greatly and, in some cases, guns with locks that make the trigger inaccessible can still fire, if loaded. In general, trigger locks are not intended to be used on loaded guns.

**WAITING PERIOD:** A legally imposed interval between the time when an individual goes to a dealer to purchase a gun and the time when one can actually receive the gun. For example, Maryland has a 7-day waiting period to allow law enforcement officials time to conduct a background check of the prospective purchaser. Other states, like Virginia, conduct "instant" background checks without a waiting period. As of 1998, the federal Brady Law requires an instant background check. States may continue to impose their own waiting periods, however.

*Thanks to the Firearm Injury Center, Department of Emergency Medicine, Medical College of Wisconsin and the Center for Gun Policy and Research, Johns Hopkins University for providing most of this information.*

**Spotlight on Depiction of Health and Social Issues**

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