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# Gun Violence Terminology Resource

## Fear-Less Mission Priority Terms

- **AR-15 RIFLE:** A semi-automatic, self-loading rifle. The "AR" in AR-15 stands for "ArmaLite Rifle," and is most-commonly used to refer only to the civilian semi-automatic variants of the rifle which lack the fully automatic function.
- **ASSAULT WEAPON:** A non-specific phrase generally referring to firearms that have high ammunition capacity and semi-automatic mode of action. Handguns, rifles, and shotguns having these characteristics are often referred to as assault weapons, but there is no technical definition that is routinely applied
- **AUTOMATIC WEAPONS:** Fully automatic weapons, sometimes referred to as "machine guns," will fire bullets as long as the trigger is depressed and ammunition remains in the magazine. Semi-automatic firearms fire one bullet each time the trigger is pulled.  
FIREARM: A device that launches a projectile using the energy generated by the burning of gunpowder.
- **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.

## Complete Glossary of Terms

- **ACTION:** The working mechanism of a firearm. This determines the process by which the firearm is cocked, fired, and reloaded.
- **ACTIVE SHOOTER:** A term used to describe the perpetrator of an ongoing mass shooting.
- **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 a manual pump mechanism. Often these types of guns fire pellets or BBs. These are not firearms.
- **AMMUNITION:** A plural term referring to multiple fully assembled cartridges ready to be fired.
- **ASSAULT WEAPON:** A non-specific phrase generally referring to firearms that have high ammunition capacity and semi-automatic mode of action. Handguns, rifles, and shotguns having these characteristics are often referred to as assault weapons, but there is no technical definition that is routinely applied
- **AUTOMATIC WEAPONS:** Fully automatic weapons, sometimes referred to as "machine guns," will fire bullets as long as the trigger is depressed and ammunition remains in the magazine. Semi-automatic firearms fire one bullet each time the trigger is pulled.
- **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 background checks 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 tricky because there is no readily accessible database listing many categories of persons prohibited from purchasing firearms. (This is generally the case with mental health records, but not criminal records, probably important to point this out – many may read this and believe that criminal records are not part of common databases)

- **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 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 muzzle. Thus, the longer the barrel, the higher the bullet's velocity, although other factors increase or decrease velocity. Additionally, modern firearm 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 cause injury.
- **BORE:** The interior diameter of a gun's barrel. See "Caliber" below.
- **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 establishing 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 a firearm 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, such as copper. Bullets are manufactured in various shapes and weights, each designed to have specific characteristics in flight and on impact with the target.
- **BUREAU OF ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, FIREARMS AND EXPLOSIVES (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 a firearm frame or stock. This is where the grip is attached for handguns, and for rifles and shotguns, the stock is mounted to the shoulder of the person using the firearm.
- **CALIBER:** The size of the bullet used in a particular firearm, 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 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 the center of the casing's base.
- **CHAMBER:** The portion of a firearm 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 round can be fired. Depending on the mechanism of action, this process is done either automatically or manually. In contrast, revolvers contain multiple chambers (that are not an integral part of the barrel), each holding a single cartridge, which rotates into the firing position behind the barrel.
- **CHILD ACCESS PREVENTION LAWS:** State or local laws, also called "CAP laws" or safe-storage laws, require adults to store their firearms so that children are less likely to gain access to them. CAP laws typically require adults to store firearms and ammunition separately or use a lockbox or trigger lock.
- **CONCEALED CARRY LAW:** Laws that define the conditions under which individuals may carry a concealed weapon in public, not on their private property. Concealed carry laws are generally state, not federal laws. In some states, a permit is required for a person to carry concealed, while in others, individuals not otherwise prohibited by state or federal law can carry concealed. Permits are issued in the states under either a "may issue" or "shall issue" system. In "may issue" states, law enforcement authorities have discretion, and can deny or grant permits for subjective reasons. In "shall issue" states, permits "shall" issue permits where an individual objectively meets the criteria established under state law.
- **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, contains multiple chambers. A cylinder usually contains six chambers, but some handguns are made with more or less. When a revolver is discharged, the cylinder is rotated manually or through the action to bring the next chamber in line with the barrel.

- **FEDERAL FIREARMS LICENSEE (FFL):** Any person, partnership, or business entity holding a valid license issued by the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives 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 firearms transfers 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 that launches a projectile using the energy generated by gunpowder burning.
- **FIREARM OWNERS PROTECTION ACT OF 1986:** See Registration
- **FIREARMS DEALER:** Someone engaged in the business of selling firearms. Under federal law, a person must obtain a federal firearms license (FH). 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 in the bolt mechanism 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 of a firearm, also known as the receiver, to which the other components (barrel, etc.) are attached.
- **FULL METAL JACKET:** A term referring to a bullet that includes a layer of copper or other material completely enveloping a lead core.
- **GRIP:** The point at which the user holds a firearm during use. Grips are usually made of wood, rubber, or synthetic materials, and can be custom designed to fit a user's hand. The grip is generally an integral part of the frame.
- **GUN CONTROL:** A generic term used to describe many different policy 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 specific categories of people, including felons and minors. Some gun control efforts focus on specific firearms thought to pose unique risks, like "assault weapons" or "Saturday Night Specials"
- **GUN CONTROL ACT OF 1968:** The primary federal law governing who may buy and sell firearms. It provides that persons engaged in 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 gas when the primer ignites.
- **GUN SHOW:** Gun shows are short-term (usually 1 or 2 days) 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 sell 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). Because private sales occurring anywhere do not require a background check under federal law (although state law may), private sales occurring at gun shows do not require a federal 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:** When the trigger on a firearm is pulled, the potential energy stored in the mainspring is released, forcing the hammer down onto the firing pin.
- **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, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) that compiles digitized 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 different from lead bullets with no such jacketing.
- **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 licensed gun dealers who sell firearms from their homes and do not have a commercial store.
- **MAGAZINE:** A container that holds cartridges to be fed into the action of a firearm. Often the magazine is a removable component that inserts into a grip or receiver of a firearm. The capacity of the magazine can vary greatly.
- **MAINSRING:** Cocking the hammer on a firearm compresses the mainspring, generating potential energy needed to strike the firing pin after the trigger is pulled.

- **MINORS' ACCESS TO GUNS:** Firearm access by persons under 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. It 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.
- **MUZZLE:** The end of the barrel from which the bullet exits.
- **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 a permit.
- **PERSONALIZED GUN:** Guns designed to be fired only by an authorized user, such as those requiring a PIN or identifying code ring worn by the owner to unlock the system. (See Safety Devices Built In section.)
- **PISTOL:** Technically, a firearm is synonymous with a handgun, meaning a hand-held firearm of any type. Usually, the word refers 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. The 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 federal, laws applicable to firearms transfers to non-licensees. 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:** Recording the owner of an item, such as a car or a firearm. As part of the Firearm Owners Protection Act of 1986, Congress expressly 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 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. Rimfire rifles are typically of the smaller calibers.
- **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. Saturday Night Special is a term of art, enjoyed by the media, but more technical is needed to have meaning.
- **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." The Supreme Court has recently interpreted this Amendment to mean that it refers to an individual right, not a collective one.
- **SENTENCE ENHANCEMENT:** The imposition of a prison sentence longer than it otherwise would be for a crime. Crimes committed with a firearm are often subject to imposition of a prison sentence above and beyond that of 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 a small shot at short range, as in hunting small game.
- **SIDEARM:** Weapons that may be worn at the side or the waist.
- **SILENCER:** See suppressor below
- **SLIDE:** A device that surrounds the barrel of semi-automatic handguns. As its name implies, the slide moves backward, 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 backward, thus opening the breech to expel the empty cartridge case and re-cocking the hammer for the next shot.
- **STRAW PURCHASER/ STRAW MAN PURCHASER:** A qualified purchaser who purchases a firearm for someone who is legally forbidden to purchase that firearm. It is illegal for a firearms dealer to sell a firearm 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. It is a federal felony for someone to act as a straw purchaser.
- **SUPPRESSOR:** A device that can be attached to a handgun to reduce the sound of the bullet's discharge. The more appropriate, technical term is "suppressor."
- **TRACING:** Use of the serial number and other identifying information of a gun to track a recovered crime gun from its source (manufacturer 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 metal loop extending down from the frame and encircles the trigger. It is designed to protect the trigger against accidental discharge.
- **TRIGGER LOCKS:** Locking devices that may 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 varies 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 when an individual goes to a dealer to purchase a gun and 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.

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**Additional resources:** [www.eiconline.org/fear-less](http://www.eiconline.org/fear-less)

