



# **Handgun Commerce**

**in**

**California  
1999**

**A Report from the Violence Prevention Research Program**



The Violence Prevention Research Program is located at the University of California, Davis. Its work addresses the causes, nature, and prevention of violence.

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# Executive Summary

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This report provides basic information on handgun commerce. Its principal focus is on handguns sold in California in 1999. It also contains information on handgun purchasers, denied sales, handgun manufacturers, and commercial firearm licensees such as gun dealers and pawnbrokers. Its purpose is to inform the public, policy makers, and others about commerce in an important consumer product—the handgun—which has legitimate uses but is also frequently involved in criminal and self-inflicted violence.

*Handgun Commerce in California, 1999* relies largely on information in the Dealer's Record of Sales (DROS) archive that is maintained by the California Department of Justice. A DROS record is created each time an individual seeks to purchase a new or used handgun from a firearm licensee. The record, which contains basic identifying information on that individual and on the handgun he or she wishes to purchase, is sent to the Department of Justice for review. A small percentage of sales are denied by the Department of Justice after a mandatory background check; records for both approved and denied sales are retained by the Department.

This report does not contain information on all handgun sales in California. Some sales between private individuals are not included because there is no record of them: State law requires that all such private-party transfers be routed through a firearm licensee so that a DROS record can be made and a background check can be conducted, but compliance is less than perfect. We have also excluded transactions involving the operations of the Department of Justice itself and certain other transactions. As a result of those exclusions, the sales tabulations here do not agree exactly with those provided by the Department of Justice. We also elected to include denials pursuant to the Los Angeles one-gun-a-month ordinance, which are not included in Department of Justice figures.

## **Handgun Sales**

A total of 235,875 handguns were sold in California in 1999, approximately 10.4 sales per 1,000 persons ages 21 and older. Handgun sales fluctuated little from month to month until the end of the year, then increased considerably. Sales ranged from a low of 16,491 in January to a high of 31,706 in December.

While the number of handgun sales was highest in urban counties (Los

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Angeles County ranked first with 50,338 sales), the rate of sales on a per-capita basis was highest in predominantly rural counties (Shasta County ranked first with 33.4 sales per 1,000 persons ages 21 and older).

Seventy percent of handguns sold in California in 1999 were semiautomatic pistols. Large-caliber handguns were the most common (45.4%), and most handguns had long barrels (78.1%). Nearly two-thirds of handguns were manufactured in the United States.

Males bought 92.9% of handguns, and 73.2% were bought by persons ages 25–34, 35–44, or 45–54.

## **Handgun Manufacturers**

While handguns from 646 manufacturers were sold in California in 1999, 20 manufacturers accounted for 83.8% of all sales. Of these top manufacturers, only 11 are primarily located in the United States. Several of the remaining top manufacturers operate in the U.S. through subsidiaries. Overall, Smith & Wesson ranked first in sales (44,520 handguns, 18.9%), followed by Sturm, Ruger (33,367 handguns, 14.1%), and Glock, a manufacturer based in Austria (22,410 handguns, 9.5%).

Smith & Wesson was the leading manufacturer of revolvers sold in California (26,588 revolvers, 39.8%), and Glock was the largest manufacturer of semi-automatic pistols sold in the state (22,410 pistols, 13.5%)

Smith & Wesson was the largest manufacturer of large-caliber handguns (22,942 handguns, 21.6%) and medium-caliber handguns (17,421 handguns, 19.2%) sold in California. Sturm, Ruger was the largest manufacturer of small caliber handguns (9,582 handguns, 25.6%).

Three of the top 20 manufacturers are headquartered in Southern California: Bryco Arms/Jennings Firearms (Costa Mesa), Davis Industries (Chino), and Phoenix Arms (Ontario) together accounted for 6,436 (2.7%) of the handguns sold in California.

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## **Denied Sales**

There were 2,433 denied sales in 1999, or approximately 1 denied sale for every 100 handguns sold. A total of 2,252 individuals attempted to purchase handguns but were denied; 93.4% of these individuals were denied once, and the remainder were linked to as many as 9 denied sales. Nearly all (94.7%) of the denied sales were to males, and most (59.3%) were to persons ages 25-34 or 35-44.

Compared to handguns that were actually sold, handguns in denied sales were somewhat more likely to be pistols, be of medium caliber, have short barrels, and be of U.S. origin.

A prior criminal conviction was by far the most common reason for a denied sale (78.5%); 40.2% of denials were for felony convictions and 38.3% for misdemeanor convictions. Among felonies, drug-related offenses were the most common (27.5%). Nearly all (89.4%) of those denied for misdemeanor offenses had been convicted of assault.

## **Handgun Purchasers**

A total of 157,700 Californians purchased these 235,875 handguns. The vast majority (91.4%) of the handgun purchasers were male, and more than half (51.3%) were ages 25-34 or 35-44. Most of the purchasers (76.2%) bought only one handgun; the 23.8% of purchasers who bought more than one handgun accounted for 49.1% of all handguns sold.

A total of 120,126 people bought one handgun in 1999. Most of these handgun purchasers were male (90.7%), and they were most commonly ages 25-34 (27.4%).

Another 37,574 people bought at least 2 and as many as 305 handguns in 1999; they bought 115,749 handguns in total. Most of these purchasers were male (94.4%), and they were most commonly ages 35-44 (26.1%).

There were 2,929 people who bought more than five handguns in 1999. They accounted for only 1.9% of all purchasers but bought 12.4% of all handguns sold: a total of 29,188 handguns.

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## Firearm Licensees

A total of 2,177 firearm licensees reported handgun sales in 1999, approximately 9.6 licensees per 100,000 persons ages 21 and older. The majority of licensees reporting sales were in the urban counties of Southern California and the San Francisco Bay area (Los Angeles County ranked first with 327 licensees), but the highest numbers of licensees on a per-capita basis were found in rural counties (Alpine County ranked first with 119.0 licensees per 1,000 persons ages 21 and older).

Gun dealers accounted for 86.5% of both licensees and handgun sales; pawnbrokers accounted for 11.5% of licensees and 10.0% of handgun sales.

The 43.1% of all retailers who sold fewer than 10 handguns accounted for just 1.5% of handgun sales by retailers. The 109 retailers selling 500 or more handguns accounted for 5.1% of all retailers but 57.2% of handgun sales by retailers.

Of the retailers with the largest number of denied sales, about half were also among those with the largest number of handgun sales. Denied sales for these retailers ranged from 0.3 to 5.5 for every 100 handguns sold.



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