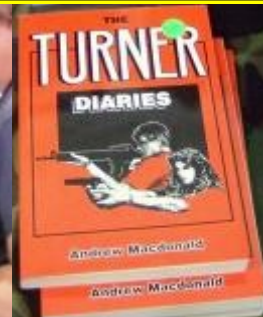
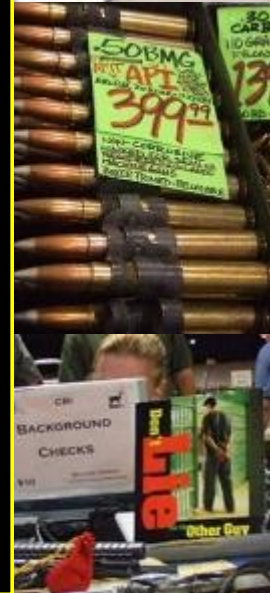


 I HAVE A DREAM



# Inside Gun Shows

## What Goes On When Everybody Thinks Nobody's Watching





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What Goes on  
When Everybody Thinks  
Nobody's Watching

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<http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/vprp>.

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This report and the work on which it is based could not have been completed without the support, made manifest in many ways, of my colleagues in the Department of Emergency Medicine. Thanks to all.

The project would never have been undertaken but for the uncompromising support given by the University of California to the principle that the pursuit of knowledge is a great privilege and therefore an obligation, come what may. Stan Glantz once wrote that this behavior is what makes the University of California a great public institution. He was right.

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# Introduction

Gun shows are surrounded by controversy. On the one hand, they are important economic, social and cultural events with clear benefits for those who attend. On the other, they provide the most visible manifestation of a largely unregulated form of commerce in guns and, partly for that reason, are an important source of guns used in criminal violence.

The intent of this report is to document the broad range of what actually takes place at gun shows, with an emphasis on activities that appear to pose problems for the public's health and safety. Its purpose is not to inflame, but to inform. The report embodies its author's belief that objective evidence is beneficial to clear thought and sound action on important public matters.

*Inside Gun Shows* reflects observations made at 78 gun shows in 19 states, most of them during 2005-2008. Structured data on a subset of these shows were published previously.<sup>1</sup> During a period of exploratory work focused on developing methods for data collection, it became evident that descriptive anecdotes and quantitative evidence would never be adequate to the task. A camera was added.

It was important here, as often in field research, to avoid a Hawthorne effect: change in what is being observed introduced by the process of observation itself. For that reason conversation was kept to a minimum; no attempts were made to induce the behaviors that are depicted; criminal activity, when observed, was not reported; the camera was kept hidden.

It was also important to minimize any risk to individual persons, even though the behaviors being documented were occurring at events that were open to the public. No audio recordings were made, except of the author's own notes. Faces in the photographs have been obscured. The project was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Readers should be aware that the author has worked collaboratively for many years with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and the California Department of Justice. The Violence Prevention Research Program receives support from the National Institute of Justice for research on gun tracing data and from the California Department of Justice for work on firearm-related domestic violence. Material concerning those agencies appears in this report.

## Reading the Report

The following comments on the report's organization may be helpful. Chapter 1 reviews existing research and other evidence on the structure of gun commerce generally, the sources of guns used in crime, and the place of gun shows in that broader context. Chapter 2 takes up the ordinary details of gun show operations and presents a photographic overview of a day at a gun show. Chapters 3 through 6 are largely photo-essays. Chapter 3 takes up undocumented and illegal gun commerce; its core is a series of photo-narratives of private party gun sales and of what appear to be illegal "straw" purchases of guns. Chapter 4 focuses on the weaponry and related merchandise available at gun shows. Chapters 5 and 6 deal briefly with cultural, political, and social aspects of these events, again emphasizing aspects that appear problematic. Chapter 7 assesses these observations and makes recommendations for intervention.

The following terminology is used. Gun sellers who have federal firearms licenses are referred to as *licensed retailers*, whether they are gun dealers or pawnbrokers. Private parties without federal firearms licenses who sell guns are of two types: *unlicensed vendors*, who rent table space and display their guns from a fixed location, and *individual attendees*, who may be at the show primarily as customers but have also brought guns to sell. The occasional attendee who is both an active seller and buyer of guns is a *gun trader*. Sales by unlicensed vendors and individual attendees are collectively referred to as *private party gun sales*.

For simplicity's sake, the term *assault weapon* will be used to describe semiautomatic, civilian versions of selective fire or fully automatic military firearms.

## **A Final Note**

This report will be most useful if it is treated as an introduction to a complex and important subject. Readers are encouraged to take a weekend—even better, take several—and see for themselves.

## **References**

1. Wintemute GJ. Gun shows across a multistate American gun market: observational evidence of the effects of regulatory policies. *Injury Prevention*. 2007;13:150-156.