



Frequently Asked Questions About Ghost Guns

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What are ghost guns?

Ghost guns are fully functional firearms that can be made at home using parts and kits that are available to purchase from gun dealers or through online vendors. The key component of a firearm is the receiver, which holds the parts that enable it to actually shoot, such as the hammer, bolt or breechblock, and firing mechanism.¹ Ghost guns are made using receivers that are not technically finished and require a few additional steps at home, such as drilling a few holes, before they can be used to make a functional gun. Kits and online tutorials for making guns using unfinished receivers have proliferated in recent years and do not require any particular technical expertise.² A former Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) special agent described the ease with which fully functional guns can be made at home using these parts: “If you can put Ikea furniture together, you can make one of these.”³

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Guns made at home using unfinished receivers have become known as “ghost guns” because they do not have a serial number or any other identifying information and are therefore untraceable when they are recovered after being used in a crime.⁴

Why are ghost guns currently legal under federal law?

Under current federal law, gun manufacturers and importers are required to engrave a serial number on the frame or receiver of each firearm,⁵ and gun dealers are required to conduct a background check before selling any firearm.⁶ The law defines “firearm” for the purpose of these requirements to mean “any weapon (including a starter gun) which will or is designed to or may readily be converted to expel a projectile by the action of an explosive” or “the frame or receiver of any such weapon.”⁷ However, ATF has long interpreted this definition of firearm to include only fully finished firearms, frames, and receivers—meaning that those that are not technically finished and require a few additional steps before they can be used to make a fully functional gun are not subject to these legal requirements.⁸

Why are ghost guns a problem?

Ghost guns pose two primary problems. First, because the parts used to make these guns are not considered to be firearms under the current interpretation of the law, individuals can buy them without undergoing a background check via the National

Instant Criminal Background Check System. This means that individuals who are prohibited from buying or possessing guns under federal law can easily evade this restriction by simply buying a kit and making their own gun at home.

Second, because ghost guns are not required to have a serial number or other unique identifying information, they are completely untraceable if they are recovered by law enforcement in connection with a violent crime. This problematic aspect of these firearms gave rise to their nickname. Ghost guns offer very little evidentiary value to investigators working to solve crimes involving their use, making it much more difficult to develop leads and identify potential perpetrators.

Are ghost guns frequently used in violent crime?

Yes, ghost guns are increasing being used in shootings across the country:

- In July 2020, an individual who was prohibited from possessing guns allegedly murdered two people in Pennsylvania using a homemade 9mm handgun.⁹
- In November 2019, a 16-year-old shot five of his classmates at Saugus High School in California—two of them fatally—using a homemade handgun, before fatally shooting himself.¹⁰
- In August 2019, a shooter used a homemade gun kit to build a .223-caliber firearm that he later used to fire 41 shots in 32 seconds in a bar in Dayton, Ohio, shooting 26 people and killing nine.¹¹
- In 2017, in Northern California, a man prohibited from possessing firearms ordered kits to build AR-15-style rifles. On November 13, he initiated a series of shootings that began with fatally shooting his wife at home, followed by a rampage the next day during which he fired at multiple people in several different locations, including an elementary school, killing five people and injuring dozens more.¹²
- In 2013, a shooter opened fire in Santa Monica, California, shooting 100 rounds, killing five people, and injuring several others at a community college using a homemade AR-15 rifle. Reporting indicates the shooter had previously tried to purchase a firearm from a licensed gun dealer and failed a background check, potentially indicating why he opted to order parts to build a gun instead.¹³

Law enforcement officials around the country are sounding the alarm about the dramatic increase in the recovery of ghost guns at crime scenes in their communities. ATF reported that approximately 10,000 ghost guns were recovered across the country in 2019.¹⁴ Ghost guns have also been illegally trafficked to Mexico.¹⁵ In addition:

- In 2019, Washington, D.C., police recovered 115 ghost guns, a 360 percent increase from 2018, when they recovered 25 ghost guns, and a 3,733 percent increase from 2017, when only three such firearms were recovered.¹⁶
- In 2019, ATF reported recovering 117 ghost guns in Maryland with almost 25 percent recovered from Baltimore alone. Ghost gun recoveries in the state then tripled in 2020.¹⁷

- According to law enforcement in Philadelphia, ghost gun recoveries in that city rose 152 percent from 2019 to 2020.¹⁸
- The special agent in charge of the ATF Los Angeles Field Division reported in January 2021 that 41 percent of the division’s cases involve ghost guns, and a May 2019 statewide analysis in California found that 30 percent of all guns recovered in connection with a crime in the state did not have serial numbers.¹⁹

In addition, an investigation by The Trace found that ghost guns are increasingly becoming the weapon of choice for violent white supremacists and anti-government extremists.²⁰

What is the solution for addressing ghost guns?

There are two potential approaches for banning ghost guns. First, Congress could pass legislation clarifying that unfinished receivers must be regulated in the same manner as fully finished firearms, which would require that these components be marked with serial numbers and only sold after a background check. Legislation has been introduced in Congress²¹ that would enact this change at the federal level, and eight states have enacted state laws to address the problem of ghost guns.²²

The proliferation of ghost guns can also be addressed administratively. ATF should issue revised guidance clarifying that unfinished receivers that need only a few final steps before they can be used to make a fully functional firearm meet the statutory definition of “firearm” and are therefore subject to the same legal requirements as finished firearms.

Endnotes

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