



Concealed Carry Is Linked to Increased Gun Violence in Wisconsin

By Eugenio Weigend Vargas and Jeri Bonavia | September 1, 2021

In November 2011, a new law went into effect in Wisconsin that dramatically changed the state’s approach to public carry of firearms.¹ For the first time, individuals in Wisconsin were allowed to carry concealed firearms in their community after obtaining a concealed carry weapons (CCW) permit from the Wisconsin Department of Justice. The law established relatively minimal eligibility requirements for a permit: Applicants must be a state resident; be at least 21 years old; not be prohibited from gun possession under federal and state law; and fulfill minimal training requirements, such as presenting a hunter education certificate or a current or an expired CCW license from another state.² Permits are valid for five years and can be renewed without completing any additional training. Also, the law does not provide the state Department of Justice with any discretion in determining whether to issue a CCW permit: If an individual meets the minimum statutory eligibility requirements, the agency must issue the permit.³ According to data from Wisconsin’s Department of Justice, from 2011 through 2020, 706,575 applications for concealed carry permits were issued and only 14,575 applications were denied after the applicant failed a background check.⁴

Although the law passed roughly a decade ago, there is a dearth of research addressing its potential effects on public safety in Wisconsin, in part because the law includes limitations on access to such data.⁵ However, an analysis of publicly available data from local agencies, the FBI, and other national databases suggests that the CCW law has led to negative consequences for safety in the state. Three categories of violent gun-related crime have increased since its implementation: gun homicides, aggravated assaults that involve a gun, and gun-related homicides and assaults against law enforcement officers. In addition, gun theft in Wisconsin has increased dramatically. The law is also associated with a significant rise in gun sales, particularly handguns, in the state, suggesting that it may have incentivized more Wisconsin residents to become gun owners.

These data provide more than sufficient evidence for lawmakers in Wisconsin to take a second look at the CCW law and take action to strengthen it. Even as states across the country move to weaken laws related to carrying guns in public—with

some going so far as to eliminate permit requirements altogether, whether for open or concealed carry⁶—Wisconsin’s experience provides an instructive example of the potential harms caused by such an approach.

Wisconsin has seen a dramatic increase in gun-related violence

While many advocates of concealed carry licensing laws that allow more guns in public spaces cite a desire for improved safety, there is no evidence to suggest that expanding public carry reduces violence. Nationally, gun usage in self-defense occurs in less than 1 percent of violent crimes; in fact, guns are often used offensively by CCW permit holders, such as by escalating arguments outside the home.⁷

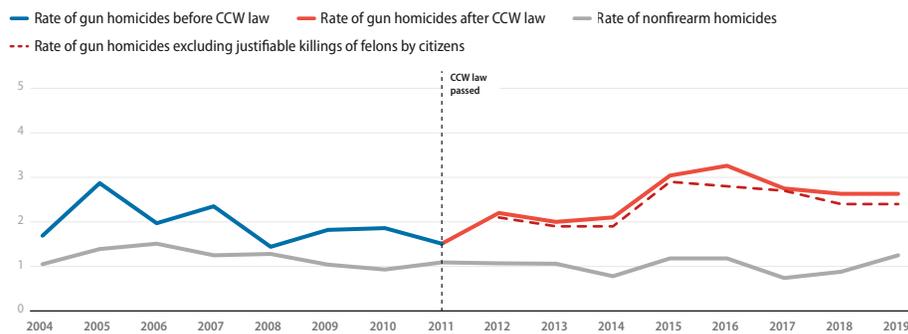
Moreover, studies have shown that using guns for self-defense is no more effective than other defensive measures.⁸ On the contrary, recent studies have concluded that states with more permissive concealed carry laws—including “shall-issue” states⁹ such as Wisconsin—have higher rates of gun homicides than states with regulations that provide law enforcement agencies the discretion to deny CCW licenses.¹⁰ Similarly, a 2019 study concluded that the adoption of shall-issue or right-to-carry laws were associated with a 10 percent to 15 percent increase in violent crime rates a decade after implementation.¹¹

Analysis of violent crime data in Wisconsin since the enactment of the CCW law provides further evidence that weak public carry laws contribute to an increase in violent gun-related crime. Notably, trends in Wisconsin suggest that the passage of the CCW law was associated with a rise in gun homicides.¹² As shown in Figure 1, gun homicide rates in Wisconsin were on the decline before 2012. However, this trend changed between 2011 and 2012, during the time of the implementation of the law, and began to shift upward. In fact, the gun homicide rate from 2012 to 2019 was 33 percent higher than the gun homicide rate in the state from 2004 to 2011.¹³ The proportion of homicides perpetrated with firearms also increased considerably. While 62 percent of homicides from 2004 to 2011 were perpetrated with a gun, this percentage rose to 72 percent from 2012 to 2019.¹⁴ Furthermore, this increase in gun homicides was not accompanied by a similar increase in non-firearm homicides in the state, suggesting that any changes that affected homicide trends beginning in 2011 were specific to guns.

FIGURE 1

Gun homicides in Wisconsin rose after the passage of the conceal carry weapons (CCW) law at the end of 2011

Rates of homicides in Wisconsin per every 100,000 people, 2004–2019



Source: Center for American Progress analysis of data from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Injury Prevention and Control: Data and Statistics (WISQARS): Fatal Injury and Violence Data," available at <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html> (last accessed April 2021). Data to remove justifiable killings came from Center for American Progress analysis of Jacob Kaplan, "Jacob Kaplan's Concatenated Files: Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program Data: Supplementary Homicide Reports, 1976-2019" (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2021), available at <https://doi.org/10.3886/E100699V10>.

Similarly, the rise in gun homicide rates after 2011 did not occur in other neighboring states, suggesting that this was a problem specific to Wisconsin. Minnesota's gun homicide rate from 2012 through 2019 was only 3.7 percent higher than its homicide rate from 2004 through 2011, before the implementation of Wisconsin's concealed carry law.¹⁵ In Michigan, the rate of gun homicides from 2012 through 2019 was slightly lower than from 2004 through 2011.¹⁶ This counters the possibility of regional factors affecting gun homicides after 2011 and suggests that abrupt changes in gun homicide trends in Wisconsin can be attributed to state-level causes such as the passage of concealed carry laws.

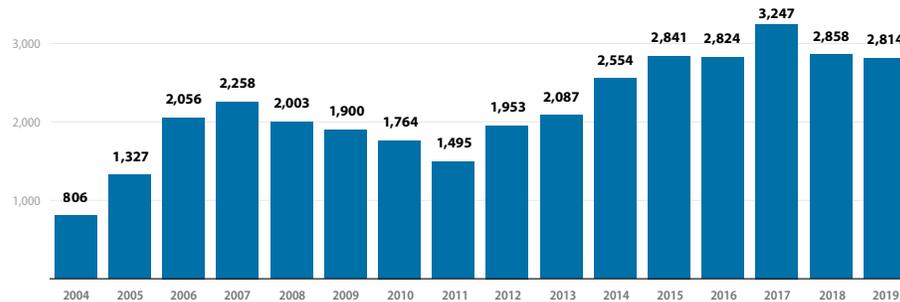
Furthermore, evidence indicates that the rise of gun homicides in Wisconsin after 2011 is not attributed to an increase in homicides classified as occurring in the context of self-defense.¹⁷ Although there was an increase in self-defense homicides—with 78 such cases from 2012 to 2019, compared with 27 cases from 2011 to 2004—Wisconsin saw an upward trend in overall gun homicides after 2011 even when these cases were removed from the authors' analysis.¹⁸ (see Figure 1) The average annual rate of gun homicides from 2012 to 2019, excluding self-defense cases, was 2.4 per every 100,000 people—a rate 24 percent higher than the average annual gun homicide rate from 2004 to 2011.¹⁹

Gun-related aggravated assaults in Wisconsin also increased after the implementation of the CCW law. After a four-year decline in aggravated assaults with a gun from 2007 to 2011, trends shifted upward after 2011. (see Figure 2) While the annual average of aggravated assaults with firearms from 2004 to 2011 was 1,700, this increased to 2,600 aggravated assaults per year from 2012 to 2019, a 56 percent increase.²⁰ At the same time, while 21 percent of aggravated assaults were perpetrated with a gun from 2004 through 2011, this percentage rose to 25 percent from 2012 through 2019.²¹

FIGURE 2

Aggravated assaults with guns in Wisconsin rose after the passage of the conceal carry weapons (CCW) law at the end of 2011

Rates of aggravated assaults with guns in Wisconsin per every 100,000 people, 2004–2019



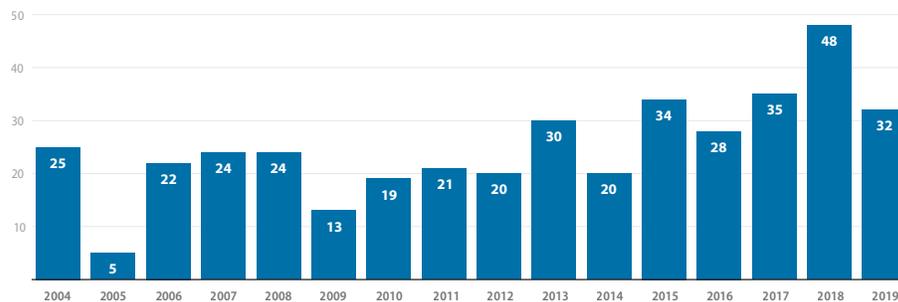
Source: Center for American Progress analysis of FBI, "Crime in the U.S.," available at <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s> (last accessed June 2021).

Finally, the data demonstrate that gun-related homicides and aggravated assaults of police officers rose after the implementation of the CCW law. While three officers were killed with a gun from 2004 to 2011, seven officers were murdered with a gun from 2012 to 2019.²² Gun-related assaults against law enforcement officers also increased considerably. From 2004 to 2011, an average of 19 officers were assaulted with a gun in Wisconsin every year.²³ This figure rose to 31 officers assaulted with a gun per year from 2012 to 2019.²⁴ (see Figure 3) In other words, the number of gun-related assaults against police officers rose by 63 percent.

FIGURE 3

Police officers in Wisconsin are at greater risk of assault after the passage of the conceal carry weapons (CCW) law at the end of 2011

Rates of aggravated assaults with guns in Wisconsin per every 100,000 people, 2004–2019



Source: Center for American Progress analysis of FBI, "Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) Program," available at <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/leoka> (last accessed June 2021).

Gun theft increased significantly following the enactment of the CCW law

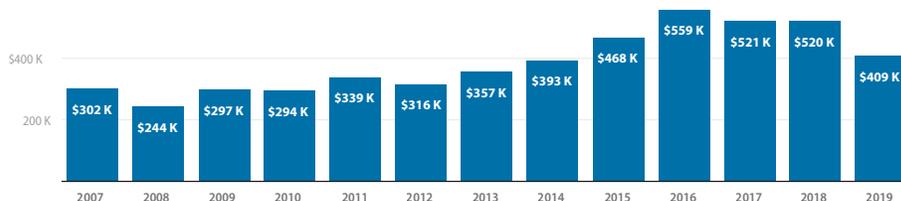
A 2017 study found that gun owners who carried their guns during the previous months were three times more likely to have their firearms stolen than other gun owners.²⁵ Data suggest that Wisconsin is not an exception: The state witnessed a rise in gun theft after the passage of the CCW law. FBI data compiled by indepen-

dent researchers and analyzed by the Center for American Progress show that the annual value of stolen guns reported by police agencies in Wisconsin from 2007 to 2011, prior to the implementation of the concealed carry law, was \$1.26 million. In contrast, the annual value of stolen guns reported by police agencies from 2012 to 2019 was \$1.48 million—a 17 percent increase.²⁶

FIGURE 4

Gun theft in Wisconsin rose after the passage of the conceal carry weapons (CCW) law at the end of 2011

Value of stolen firearms reported by local police agencies from the five largest cities in Wisconsin, 2007–2019



This graph shows the sum of the value of stolen firearms reported by local police agencies in Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, Kenosha, and Racine.

Source: Center for American Progress analysis of concatenated FBI data from Jacob Kaplan, "Jacob Kaplan's Concatenated Files: Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program Data: Property Stolen and Recovered (Supplement to Return A) 1960-2019" (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2021), available at <https://www.openicpsr.org/openicpsr/project/105403/version/V6/viewjsessionid=0DAEFD37FC0B4BFFF62A3389A295D67D>.

As reporting from police agencies can be inconsistent,²⁷ the authors analyzed the value of stolen guns reported only by police agencies from Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, Kenosha, and Racine. These local agencies represent the five largest cities in Wisconsin and, to the authors' knowledge, provide complete data around the value of stolen guns from 2007 to 2019 through the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program. As Figure 4 shows, the annual value of stolen guns reported by these agencies is considerably higher after 2011. These local agencies reported a combined annual value of \$295,000 in stolen guns from 2007 to 2011. They also reported a combined annual value of \$443,000 in stolen guns from 2012 to 2019, a 50 percent increase. This suggests that the number of stolen guns in Wisconsin increased after the passage of concealed carry laws.

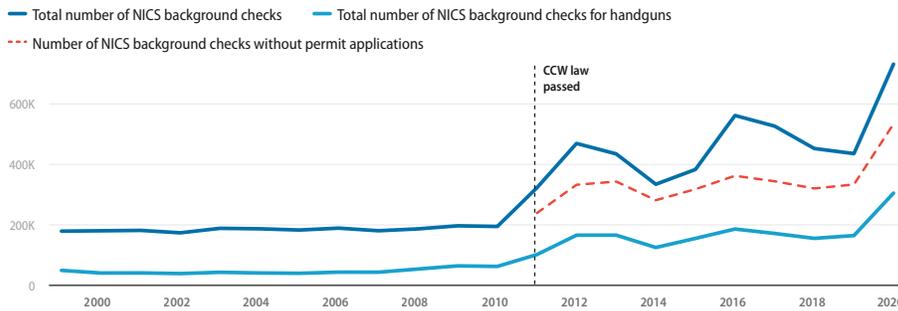
Wisconsin gun sales have increased

The CCW law in Wisconsin is also associated with a rise in gun sales—a particularly troubling trend given that higher levels of gun ownership correlate with higher rates of gun violence. A 2007 study by researchers from Harvard University, for example, found that states with higher levels of gun ownership have higher levels of homicide victimization²⁸—an association driven by gun homicides as opposed to homicides that did not involve firearms. Similarly, a 2015 study found that higher levels of gun ownership were linked to higher levels of firearm assaults as well as firearm robberies.²⁹ Another 2015 study showed that homicides of law enforcement officers were three times more likely in states with higher levels of gun ownership than in states with low levels of gun ownership.³⁰

FIGURE 5

Gun sales in Wisconsin rose after the conceal carry weapons (CCW) law passed at the end of 2011

Number of National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) background checks in Wisconsin, 1999–2020



Source: Center for American Progress analysis of FBI, "NICS Firearm Checks: Month/Year by State and Type," available at https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/nics_firearm_checks_-_month_year_by_state_type.pdf/view (last accessed July 2021).

Data indicate that after the passage of Wisconsin’s concealed carry law, the volume of firearm sales in the state increased significantly. Using the number of background checks completed through the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) as a proxy for gun sales, the authors found a considerable increase since 2011. As illustrated in Figure 5, while the annual number of NICS background checks conducted from 1999 to 2010 was close to 185,000, from 2011 to 2020, it rose to close to 340,000 background checks, an 84 percent increase.³¹ Even after excluding 2020, a year with a considerable rise in gun sales across the country, the annual number of NICS background checks conducted from 2011 to 2019 was 319,000 per year—72 percent higher than the annual average from 1999 to 2010.³² Furthermore, as illustrated in Figure 5, the rise in background checks was driven by handgun purchases. While handgun sales represented 25 percent of NICS background checks from 1999 to 2010, they represented close to 36 percent of NICS background checks from 2011 to 2020.³³

Recommendations for state policymakers

Given the overwhelming evidence and data showing the negative impacts of the Wisconsin CCW law on public safety, policymakers in the state should repeal, or at least improve, the existing law by:

- Allowing police agencies to analyze their own data around concealed carry permits and make the data available for researchers.
- Giving law enforcement agencies the discretion to deny permits, a measure that is associated with lower rates of gun homicides.

- Requiring all applicants for public gun carrying, whether they intend to carry concealed or openly, to obtain a permit specific to the firearm(s) they will carry in public.
- Improving training requirements to include a practical test demonstrating an understanding of the functionality of firearms and a proficiency in shooting those firearms. These must be conducted prior to the issuance of the permit and annually thereafter. Training requirements should also include a written test in which applicants demonstrate an understanding of the nature and limits of self-defense; state firearm laws; the risk of firearm suicide, homicide, and unintentional shootings associated with gun ownership; and the benefits of safe firearms storage.

Additionally, policymakers in Wisconsin should pass complementary gun violence prevention measures to ensure the safety of the state's population. These include:

- Passing universal background checks and extreme risk protection orders, measures supported by 80 percent of the state population.³⁴
- Requiring gun owners to promptly report all stolen firearms to law enforcement officers.

Conclusion

While advocates of Wisconsin's 2011 CCW law argued that it would promote public safety, the reality is that the lax legislation has contributed to higher rates of gun violence in the state. Policymakers should take steps to correct this by improving permit requirements and passing complementary measures. Furthermore, the overwhelming evidence out of Wisconsin is an important case study for why CCW laws are detrimental to public safety and why continued action on gun violence prevention remains critical.

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Endnotes

- 1 Wisconsin State Legislature, "2011 Wisconsin Act 35," July 22, 2011, available at <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2011/related/acts/35>.
- 2 Wisconsin Department of Justice, "Training Requirements," available at <https://www.doj.state.wi.us/dles/cib/conceal-carry/training-requirements> (last accessed May 2021).
- 3 States that are categorized as "may-issue states" allow law enforcement agencies the discretion to deny concealed carry permits if there are reasons to believe that the applicants lack good character or do not show a valid reason for needing to carry a gun in public.
- 4 Center for American Progress analysis of Wisconsin Department of Justice, "Concealed Carry Annual Reports," available at <https://www.doj.state.wi.us/dles/cib/conceal-carry/concealed-carry-annual-reports> (last accessed August 2021).
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- 8 David Hemenway and Sara J. Solnick, "The epidemiology of self-defense gun use: Evidence from the National Crime Victimization Surveys 2007–2011," *Preventive Medicine* 79 (2015). An analysis of the National Crime Victimization Surveys showed that 4.1 percent of victims that used a gun for self-defense during a crime were injured from 2007 to 2011. This percentage was similar when analyzing victims that used other protective measures (4.2 percent).
- 9 In "shall-issue states," law enforcement agencies are obligated to issue a CCW permit to anyone who meets the minimal requirements. In contrast, "may-issue states" allow law enforcement agencies the discretion to grant or deny a CCW permit. For more information, see Giffords Law Center, "Concealed Carry," available at <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/guns-in-public/concealed-carry/> (last accessed June 2021).
- 10 Emma E. Fridel, "Comparing the Impact of Household Gun Ownership and Concealed Carry Legislation on the Frequency of Mass Shootings and Firearms Homicide," *Justice Quarterly* 38 (5) (2021), available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07418825.2020.1789693>.
- 11 John J. Donohue, Abhay Aneja, and Kyle D. Weber, "Right-To-Carry Laws and Violent Crime: A Comprehensive Assessment Using Panel Data and a State-Level Synthetic Control Analysis," *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies* 16 (2) (2019), available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jels.12219>.
- 12 CAP analysis of data from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Injury Prevention and Control: Data and Statistics (WISQARS): Fatal Injury Data," available at <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html> (last accessed April 2021).
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid. While Illinois does present a significantly higher rate of gun homicides from 2012 to 2019, this is attributed to a spike in gun homicides during 2016 and 2017.
- 17 These homicides are defined by the FBI as the killings of felons during the commission of a crime, by private citizens. See, for example, FBI, "Crime in the United States 2010 Expanded Homicide Data," available at <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2010/crime-in-the-u.s.-2010/offenses-known-to-law-enforcement/expanded/expandhomicide-main/> (last accessed August 2021).
- 18 CAP analysis of Jacob Kaplan, "Jacob Kaplan's Concatenated Files: Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program Data: Supplementary Homicide Reports, 1976–2019" (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2021), available at <https://doi.org/10.3886/E100699V10>.
- 19 Ibid.
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- 21 Ibid.
- 22 CAP analysis of FBI, "Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) Program," available at <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/leoka> (last accessed June 2021).
- 23 Ibid.
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- 25 David Hemenway, Deborah Azrael, and Matthew Miller, "Whose guns are stolen? The epidemiology of Gun theft victims," *Injury Epidemiology* 4 (11) (2017), available at <https://injuryjournal.biomedcentral.com/track/pdf/10.1186/s40621-017-0109-8.pdf>.
- 26 CAP analysis of concatenated FBI data from Jacob Kaplan, "Jacob Kaplan's Concatenated Files: Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program Data: Property Stolen and Recovered (Supplement to Return A) 1960–2019" (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2021), available at <https://www.openicpsr.org/openicpsr/project/105403/version/V3/view>.
- 27 One limitation with data around the value of stolen guns is that police agencies are inconsistent in providing information—for example, they only report a few months of data. This means that a higher annual value of stolen guns after 2011 could be attributed to better reporting practices by police agencies. At the same time, it is also possible that local police agencies are now reporting less, suggesting the value of stolen guns could be underreported. Therefore, the authors conducted a second analysis with data from local police agencies that reported information for all months from 2007 to 2018. These agencies were local police departments from Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, Kenosha, and Racine. Information came from concatenated FBI data from Kaplan, "Jacob Kaplan's Concatenated Files: Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program Data: Property Stolen and Recovered (Supplement to Return A) 1960–2019."
- 28 Matthew Miller, David Hemenway, and Deborah Azrael, "State-level homicide victimization rates in the US in relation to survey measures of household firearm ownership, 2001–2003," *Social Science and Medicine* 64 (3) (2007): 656–664, available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953606004898>.
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34 Molly Beck, "Wisconsin voters still overwhelmingly support expanding background checks on firearm sales, poll shows," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, September 4, 2019, available at <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2019/09/04/wisconsin-voters-overwhelmingly-back-expanding-gun-background-checks/2209901001/>; Brady Carlson and The Associated Press, "Marquette Poll: Trump's Approval Rating Remains Below 50 Percent in Wisconsin," Wisconsin Public Radio, September 4, 2019, available at <https://www.wpr.org/marquette-poll-trumps-approval-rating-remains-below-50-percent-wisconsin>.