


Support journalism that shines a light on gun violence.

Your gift makes The Trace's reporting possible. Be part of the solution.

Donate Now 

Investigating gun violence in America.

Donate

A Decade of American Gun Violence

Permitless Carry Will Deter Shootings, Proponents Said. That's Not What's Happened.

A new Trace analysis examines the rate of fatalities in states where permitless carry was made law. Most saw shooting fatalities surge.

By **Chip Brownlee** Aug 9, 2024



Illustration by Brian Stauffer for The Trace

On February 14, gunfire erupted during a parade for the Kansas City Chiefs, who had won the Super Bowl three days earlier. What was intended to be a celebration of their victory — amid a crowd that law enforcement estimated at around a million — ended with a shooting that left one woman dead and wounded nearly two dozen others, half of them children.

More than 800 police officers were at the parade, but there was little they could legally do to intervene until the moment guns were raised and bullets began to fly. Carrying a loaded gun at a crowded parade isn't illegal in Missouri. Like 28 other states, Missouri doesn't require a permit to carry guns in public. It's a permitless carry state, where people can legally tote loaded firearms without a license, training, or a background check.

Removing permit requirements was supposed to make people safer. That's what gun rights proponents said as the laws spread across the country over the past decade. By removing roadblocks for citizens to carry guns, more people would do so, and it would deter or stop shootings. But by that metric, permitless carry appears to have failed — in Missouri and elsewhere — with most states enduring more fatal shootings after the laws took effect.



The Trace analyzed gun violence data and found that 16 of the 20 states that enacted permitless carry between 2015 and 2022 saw more shooting deaths — excluding suicides — after the laws took effect than during an equivalent time period before. In Missouri, average monthly shooting fatalities, adjusted for population, were 28.7 percent higher in the three years after the introduction of permitless carry, compared to the three years before. In neighboring Kansas, which enacted permitless carry in July 2015, fatalities were 24.9 percent higher.

The Trace's reporting on public health data concerning gun violence is funded in part by a grant from the [A-Mark Foundation](#). Here are our policies on [editorial independence](#) and [donor transparency](#).

West Virginia endured the largest increase in shooting deaths among the states analyzed by The Trace, with a surge of 40.2 percent. That is in line with a [2023 study](#) in the *American Journal of Public Health*, which reported a 48 percent increase in West Virginia's gun homicides in the four years following the adoption of permitless carry, relative to the years from 1999 to 2015.

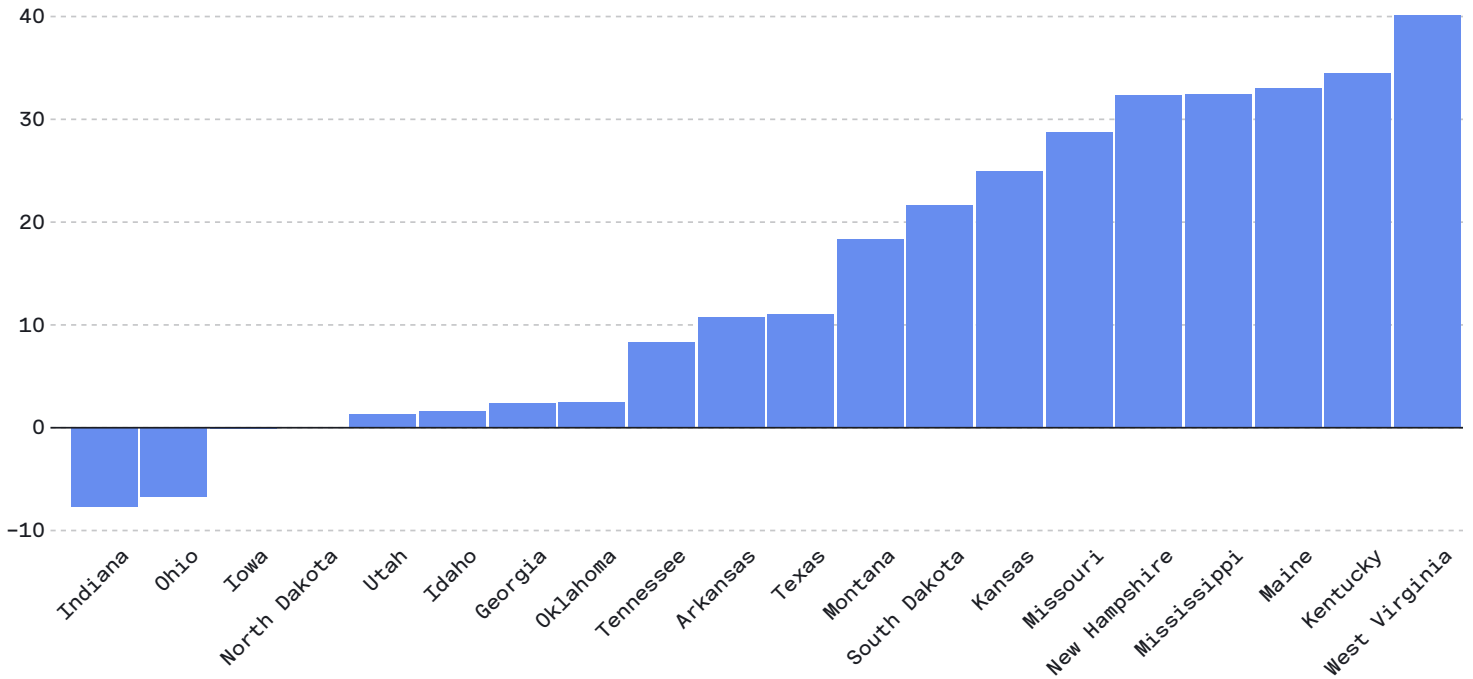
Two states saw essentially no difference in shooting fatalities following permitless carry, The Trace found. Two other states — Indiana and Ohio — saw fewer.

Shooting Deaths Were Higher in Most States After Permitless Carry

The majority of states that enacted permitless carry between 2015 and 2022 saw higher shooting death rates after implementation.

Percentage change in average monthly shooting deaths per million people

Include nonfatal shooting victims



**THE
TRACE**

Chip Brownlee / Source: [Trace Analysis of Gun Violence Archive Data](#)

The Trace’s analysis was based on data from the Gun Violence Archive, a nonprofit that logs incidents of gun violence in near-real time. The GVA first began tracking shootings through media and police reports in 2014.

A decade of data became available for the first time in 2023, overlapping with the period when most states introduced permitless carry. While GVA’s data is expansive, the analysis excludes nine states because they enacted permitless carry before the inception of GVA, or because the laws were enacted too recently to make a viable before-and-after comparison.

To be clear, just because shooting deaths increased in the months following permitless carry’s enactment doesn’t mean it is the sole or primary cause. Gun production, sales, and deaths have also increased nationwide in the past decade, and many states loosened other gun laws around the same time that they adopted permitless carry.

Most of the states that have enacted permitless carry already had lax concealed carry permit requirements before removing them entirely. Also, many permitless carry states enacted the laws shortly before or amid the pandemic, a period that saw a spike in gun violence nationwide, followed by a historic decrease in most states.

In recent studies, researchers have attempted to account for such confounding factors, and they, too, have found a relationship between looser concealed carry laws and elevated gun violence rates.

The Kansas City parade shooting was a staredown between two groups of people that spiraled into a mass shooting, prosecutors have said. At least a dozen people brandished weapons, and six people opened fire.

“The parade shooting – it was directly related to permitless carry,” Jean Peters Baker, the Jackson County prosecutor whose office is overseeing several cases related to the parade shooting, told The Trace.

Investigating America’s gun violence crisis

Reader donations help power our non-profit reporting.

Become a Member →

Lack of research

In 2023, researchers at Johns Hopkins University [found](#) that when states shifted from requiring permits and training to permitless carry, nonfatal shootings and other gun assaults increased 32 percent.

“What we have seen in our work and other high-quality, rigorous studies is that when you make it easier for people to carry guns in public, you see increases in firearm violence,” said Cassandra Crifasi, an injury epidemiologist who co-directs the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions and was the study’s lead author.

While growing, the number of rigorous studies on permitless carry specifically is somewhat limited. That’s in part due to the recency of the laws and a dearth of detailed, reliable violent crime and firearm injury data to evaluate them. Research takes time to complete and evaluating a specific policy like permitless carry — particularly the prospect of identifying and supporting causality — is difficult.

There is far more [research](#) on loosening public carry restrictions more broadly.

Years before permitless carry became a national phenomenon, dozens of states transitioned from “may issue” laws, which gave officials discretion in granting permits, to “shall issue” laws, which guarantee permits to applicants who meet basic qualifications, like age limits, a clean criminal record, and sometimes live-fire training requirements.

A [meta-analysis](#) conducted by the [RAND Corporation](#) of more than 40 rigorous academic studies found supportive evidence — the think tank’s strongest designation — that “shall issue” concealed carry laws may increase firearm homicides, overall homicides, and violent crime. One of the studies, which controlled for confounding factors, found that more permissive concealed carry laws were associated with 13 to 15 percent higher aggregate violent crime rates 10 years after adoption.

“The research at this stage is pretty robust and consistent,” said Rosanna Smart, a researcher who coleads RAND’s Gun Policy in America initiative. “Almost all of those estimates are showing that this movement to a more permissive regime is on the side of harming public safety versus protecting it, which is a stated objective of the laws.”

Permitless carry’s spread

In 2022, the Supreme Court [declared](#) the stricter “may issue” concealed carry laws unconstitutional. The ruling generally upheld permit requirements, but forced the more permissive “shall issue” regimes on the remainder of the states that still require permits.

Just a few decades ago, carrying concealed firearms in public was illegal in much of the country. As recently as 1980, at least 21 states prohibited any form of concealed carry, and until 2010, only two states — Vermont and Alaska — allowed adults to carry without a permit. But in the past decade, with the help of gun rights advocates and the National Rifle Association, permitless carry has become the norm.

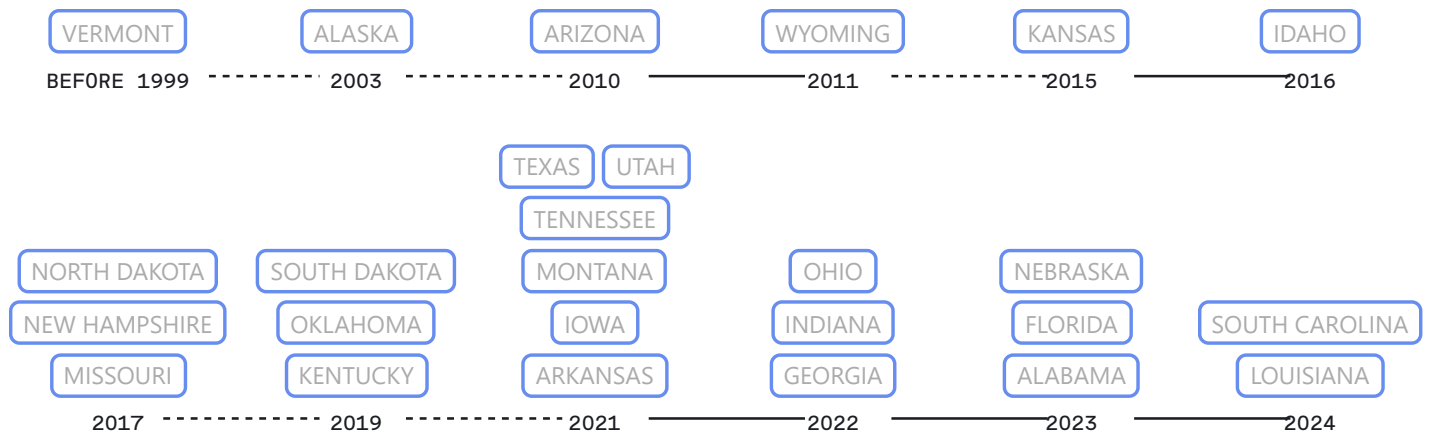
Most States Have Passed Permitless Carry Laws Since 1999

The laws allow adults to carry concealed firearms in public without needing a license.

MAINE

WEST VIRGINIA

MISSISSIPPI



**THE
TRACE**

Chip Brownlee / Source: [The Trace](#)

Politicians have pushed permitless carry through legislatures by billing the laws as a benefit to public safety.

In March 2021, Tennessee’s Republican governor, Bill Lee, appeared at an NRA virtual town hall to trumpet the permitless carry bill making its way through the state Legislature.

At the time, Tennessee, like the rest of the country, was grappling with a surge in gun violence. Lee, however, dismissed concerns from Democrats and law enforcement officials who argued that the permitless carry bill would exacerbate the violence. Instead, he positioned the bill as a crucial part of a broader “public safety agenda.”

“This particular piece of legislation not only protects the Second Amendment, but it actually creates a safer environment and stiffens penalties for those that break the law,” Lee said at the time. “While it is about a safety initiative for me, fundamentally, this is about protecting what, at the birth of our nation, our founding fathers established in the Constitution.”

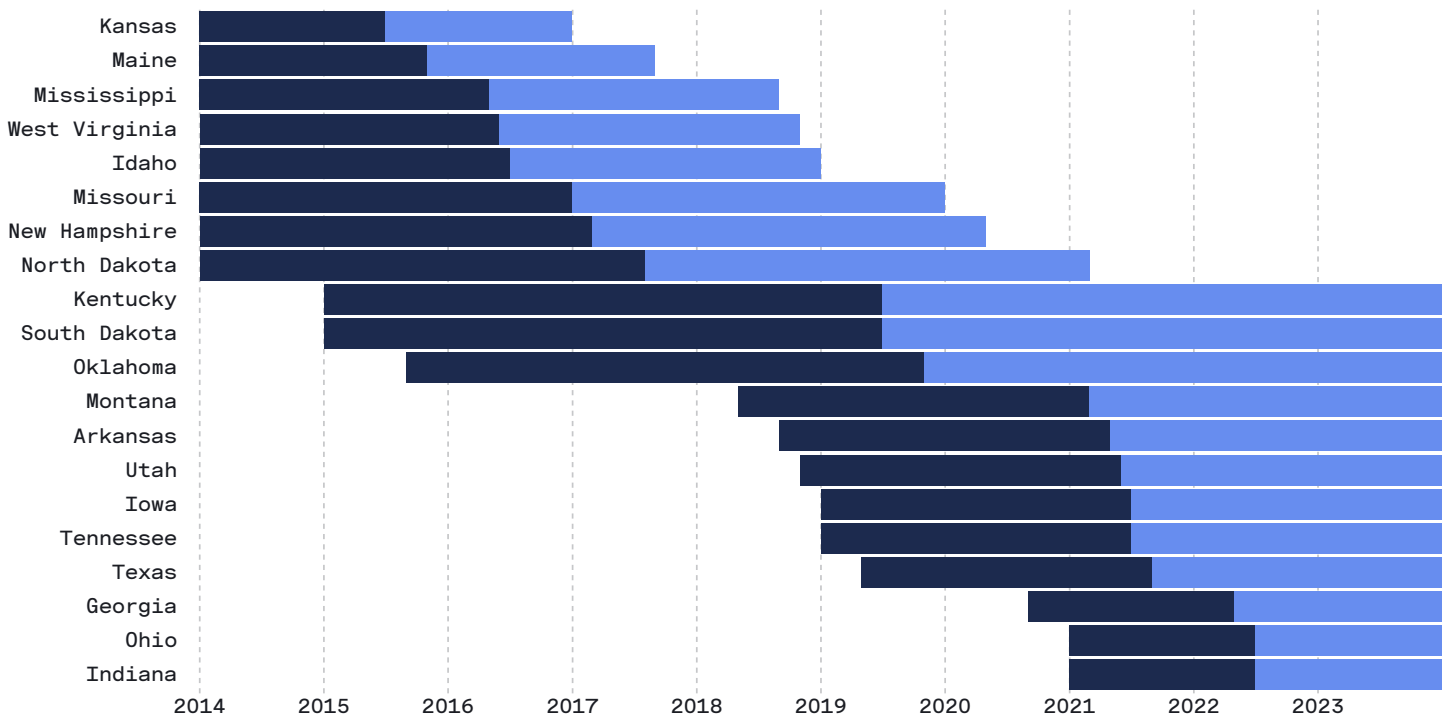
The latest state to pass permitless carry was Louisiana, where the law took effect July 4. Because Louisiana’s law has been in effect for less than a month, it’s not included in The Trace’s analysis, but in Tennessee, there was an 8 percent increase in average monthly shooting fatalities over the two-and-a-half years following permitless carry’s enactment on July 1, 2021. Overall, there were 11 percent more deaths from shootings in Tennessee over the latter 30-month period, compared to the 30 months before permitless carry.

We limited our analysis of state gun violence trends to those that removed permit requirements between July 2015 and July 2022. That was to leave at least 18 months of data on either end of implementation in a total of 20 states.

For each state, we compared an equal period of time before and after implementation while using the most data as possible. For some, like South Dakota and Kentucky, that meant as many 54 months of data on either end of implementation.

Time Periods Used for Analysis

This chart shows the **before** and **after** periods used for The Trace's analysis of the impact of permitless carry on shooting deaths.



Chip Brownlee / Source: [Trace Analysis of Gun Violence Archive Data](#)

In Kansas City, LaTasha Jacobs, a Second Amendment advocate and former firearms instructor, said she started carrying a gun to protect herself from a stalker.

“I was in a back-against-the-wall situation,” Jacobs said. “The process of having to wait or sign up for a class, the process of having to go to said class, then go

through the process of getting fingerprints and getting my permit — who knows what could have happened to me, my family, whomever, in that timeframe if I had to wait for that entire process.”

Jacobs said people intent on harming others are unlikely to abide by licensing requirements. “Restricting my access to protect myself and my family doesn’t affect criminals, but it leaves me unarmed and unable to protect my children,” she said.

But Jacobs also said she recognizes the potential dangers and implications of removing permitting and training requirements. For her, education for responsible gun ownership is necessary, even when it isn’t legally required.

“Yes, you don’t have to have a permit to carry your firearm,” she said. “But it’s important to know when, where, and how you can carry as you move about throughout the city or the state.”

Problem for law enforcement

While these data trends provide a broad picture of gun violence following the implementation of permitless carry laws, they don’t capture the day-to-day challenges faced by law enforcement and prosecutors in these states. In Missouri, one of the earliest adopters of permitless carry, officials have been grappling with these challenges for years.

Baker, the Jackson County prosecutor, said law enforcement faces “an untenable situation,” brought into sharp relief by the Super Bowl parade shooting.

“I have a young man with a SpongeBob backpack that’s got a 9mm in it,” Baker said.

Read Next

“It was legal for him to pull it out of his backpack and carry it outside of his backpack. It’s not until he’s in the aim position that it’s no longer legal. I don’t know how to articulate to people how dangerous that is — for all of us, for law enforcement, for the young people themselves.”

Since the introduction of permitless carry, law enforcement, prosecutors, and elected officials have repeatedly said the law has

made it more difficult for them to get illegal weapons off the streets.

Baker said the law has contributed at least in part to what was a record for homicides in the city in 2023 — while most of the rest of the country saw historic declines.

Three years before the parade shooting, the man who is alleged to have fired the first shots pulled out a gun during another argument over a basketball game at a Kansas City suburb's community center. It led to a small stampede as people ran from him and his gun. He pleaded guilty to misdemeanor disorderly conduct, but because of permitless carry, prosecutors couldn't charge him with carrying a gun without a license, which could have barred him from gun ownership.

"It's not like police or prosecutors missed something. We didn't miss," Baker said. "We're following the rule of law."

Chip Brownlee  

Chip is a reporter at The Trace covering federal policy related to violence prevention and firearms. He is also the author of The Trajectory newsletter, which spotlights the people, policies, and programs grappling with America's gun violence crisis.

Before joining The Trace as an investigative fellow in June 2020, Chip worked as a reporter and the editor-in-chief of his collegiate newspaper, *The Auburn Plainsman*. He also covered the state legislature, governor, courts, and elections for the Alabama Political Reporter. As an undergraduate, Chip studied political science and journalism at Auburn University. He also earned an M.A. with a concentration in politics from the Columbia Journalism School.

Are These Gun Safety Laws Helping to Reduce Violence?

An update to a major meta-analysis adds to our understanding of how some common firearm regulations may contribute to public safety.

The only newsroom dedicated to reporting on gun violence.

Your tax-deductible donation to The Trace will directly support nonprofit journalism on gun violence and its effects on our communities.

Become a Member 

A Decade of American Gun Violence

Analysis

You're More Likely to Be Shot in Selma Than in Chicago

Over the past decade, gun violence has expanded beyond the urban limits it is so often associated with, according to a Trace analysis of Gun Violence Archive data.

Olga Pierce, Jennifer Mascia, and Chip Brownlee

What We Learned From Analyzing 10 Years of Shooting Data

Samantha Storey and Brian Freskos

How We Analyzed the Toll of the Pandemic Shooting Surge

Olga Pierce

How Many People Were Killed by the Pandemic Surge in Shootings?

Olga Pierce

Investigating gun violence in America. →



Newsletter



Contact Us



Facebook



Twitter



Instagram