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**Wisconsin shatters record for background checks amid spike in gun interest**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Wisconsin in 2020 shattered the record for most firearm background checks, an indicator the year of the COVID-19 pandemic also marked a huge year for gun sales.

FBI and Wisconsin Department of Justice data shows the state saw 731,618 background checks in 2020, shattering the previous record of 561,819 in 2016. DOJ numbers show 242,321 of those checks in 2020 were performed via the state’s handgun hotline, which is used when a firearm dealer requests a background check for someone interested in buying a handgun.

Adam Campbell, a Milwaukee area shooting instructor, said it was the busiest year he’s seen.

“From my perspective and any of my colleagues in the industry, 2020 was the busiest year in the gun industry ever, period. I don’t think anyone would dispute that,” Campbell said of what he saw in his work

at Brew City Shooters Supply, located just outside Milwaukee’s city limits.

But Wisconsin Anti-Violence Effort Executive Director Jeri Bonavia said she is concerned about the increase because it could mean more gun-related deaths in the state.

“I think we, unfortunately, will see a really large spike in firearm-related suicides in our state as well,” Bonavia said.

Wisconsin is continuing with the high number of firearm background checks in 2021, with February seeing 73,836 background checks performed, according to FBI National Instant Criminal Background Check Service numbers.

The most in one month on record came in March 2020 with 77,811. One year before the pandemic took hold of Wisconsin in March 2019, the state saw 47,671 background checks. In March 2016, the previous record year for background checks, the state saw 44,925.

According to DOJ Handgun Hotline numbers requested by WisPolitics.com, almost twice as many handgun background checks occurred in 2020 as the 138,836 checks in 2019.

There were also 89,365 concealed carry weapon permit requests in 2020 while only 56,224 were made in 2019, according to DOJ numbers.

However, those numbers do not necessarily mean one gun was sold for every background check performed. Some background checks end up preventing people from purchasing a firearm.

Also, private sales of firearms in Wisconsin do not require a background check and most firearms do not need to be registered, meaning there is no way to track all the guns sold in the state.

Further, one background check can be used to purchase multiple firearms at one time.

A spokesperson from Milwaukee Police Department told WisPolitics.com there is no way to know if increased legal gun ownership in Milwaukee correlates with increased gun crimes because the department does not track how many guns are legally owned there.

Homicides in the city of Milwaukee nearly doubled in 2020, with 190 compared to 97 in 2019.

A spokesperson from the Madison Police Department told WisPolitics.com the department respects the constitutional right to bear arms, but those new firearm owners need to be responsible, practice proper firearm safety and make sure they are storing and locking their firearms correctly.

DOJ did not provide a comment to a WisPolitics.com request.

Gun store employees who spoke with WisPolitics.com say the increase in background checks is reflected in the rising number of gun sales at their stores. They said people started buying guns at the beginning of the pandemic because they were uncertain about the future, but the high sales continued as the year went on.

Campbell said 2020 saw a stark increase in gun and ammunition sales even compared to 2016, the last time gun sales shot up.

He said 2016 saw a spike in sales because people are always concerned about gun legislation changing during an election year, regardless of who wins, and they want to make sure they get their hands on guns they think might get banned.

He said people started buying guns in March 2020 because they were afraid of what might happen as grocery stores ran out of food and supplies. But they continued to clear gun store shelves throughout the year for various reasons.

“I don’t think we ever saw a year like 2020, and that includes 2012, which saw a huge, huge growth in the gun industry,” Campbell said.

Maurie Mattison, manager of Mid-City Guns in Janesville, said she has seen at least twice as many handgun sales in 2020 compared to 2019, starting “almost exactly a year ago. When everybody started getting nervous about COVID, we were extremely busy.”

She said most of those purchases were made by first-time gun owners buying self-defense handguns, shotguns and rifles.

Mattison added there would likely be more gun sales if gun stores were able to keep guns and ammunition on the shelves. But she and Campbell said handguns and ammunition of all kinds, but particularly handgun ammunition, have been difficult to keep on store shelves.

Campbell said he saw a similar increase in new gun owners and self-defense firearm sales, adding that they have slowly been increasing ammunition prices as demand increases and supply can’t keep up.

He said the average prices for 9 mm and .22-caliber rounds more than doubled in smaller gun stores while larger chains saw prices nearly double. Before the pandemic, Campbell said a box of 50 rounds of 9 mm was around $11-15, but chains are now selling them for $15-20 and some smaller stores are at $40.

He added $10 used to buy a box of 100 rounds of .22-caliber rounds, but now that $10 will only buy about half that.

“The largest ammo manufacturers, specifically Winchester, have raised prices across the board, six times in the last 12 months,” Campbell said.

Self-defense firearms are usually handguns, rifles and shotguns with shorter barrels and shorter or adjustable buttstocks compared to hunting rifles and shotguns. And self-defense firearms in general typically have higher ammunition capacities than firearms intended for hunting.

He said those price increases, which he said still don’t bring a high profit margin on ammo because it now costs more to buy from manufacturers, even led to a customer reporting his store for price gouging last year.

Campbell also said the flood of new gun buyers might have even pushed away some of his more seasoned customers, adding the ammo price spikes and limited availability have made target shooting and other sport shooting much more expensive. He said that’s unfortunate because the customers who shoot a lot and use up a lot of ammo for target practice are usually the ones who are most responsible with their guns.

Bonavia, the Wisconsin Anti-Violence Effort leader, said gun ownership and suicide are correlated. She added the increase in new gun buyers is cause for concern because people who have higher chances of suicidal tendencies could be buying those guns.

An American Journal of Preventive Medicine study released this month concluded those purchasing guns during the pandemic were more likely to have experienced suicidal thoughts. It also showed those buyers were less likely to store firearms safely.

Bonavia said the increase in sales would be less concerning if the increase came from people who already own guns and were stocking up in fear of a legislation change. She said those people are not as concerning because there is not a correlation between higher chances of suicide and owning more guns.

She added some of those deaths and suicides could be prevented if Congress passes the Enhanced Background Check Act, which the House approved March 11 on a 219-210 vote.

The bill would increase from three days to 10 days the time federally licensed firearm dealers must wait before receiving a background check in order to sell a firearm.

U.S. Rep. Ron Kind of La Crosse was the only Democratic member of Wisconsin’s House delegation to vote against the bill. All other members voted along party lines with Democrats in favor of the enhanced background checks and Republicans opposed.

Campbell said suicides are unfortunate and saddening no matter how they happen, but he said lawmakers should address the reasons behind suicides rather than the methods.

Campbell, Bonavia and Mattison all said they want those new gun owners to always practice good gun safety and be responsible with their new firearms.

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