

***COMBATING CRIME GUNS***

***THEORY OF  
CHANGE***

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UNITED AGAINST GUN VIOLENCE

# SUMMARY

To have fewer gun injuries and deaths, we must work to reduce violent crime. Brady aims to stem the flow of guns into impacted communities and stop the diversion of guns from the legal market to the illegal one. By reducing the supply of guns, we will ultimately reduce gun crime and violence.

## **We rely on a tripartite strategy: Educate; Identify; Reform.**

Signs of success include greater public awareness about the source of crime guns, more prosecutions of irresponsible dealers and straw purchasers, gun dealers adopting the Brady Code of Conduct, local legislators passing enforceable legislation around dealer licensing and trace report requirements, and ultimately fewer gun injuries and deaths from violent crime.

What if legally purchased guns never became crime guns? Far too many Americans live in fear of chronic gun violence. Ease of access to guns – often through a trafficker taking advantage of irresponsible gun dealers – is one of the contributing factors to these tragedies. Brady’s combating crime guns initiative aims to reduce gun violence in impacted communities by stemming the flow of crime guns into those communities, frequently from dealers outside their city or even their own state.

Strategically, we are focusing on the upstream source of crime guns rather than the individuals that perpetrate crime. Much like military strategies that target supply routes to starve out enemy forces, we know that without access to guns, it is harder for individuals to commit lethal crimes. Indeed, many of the individuals who commit crimes with guns are legally prohibited from purchasing guns from federally licensed firearm dealers.

One study of more than 25,000 federal offenders found that 68% of those originally convicted of gun crimes were rearrested within 5 years of release. This is much higher than their peers who did not commit crimes with guns, of which about 45% are rearrested within 5 years. Criminals often rely on straw purchasers and/or traffickers to buy guns from dealers and sell them on the black market.

Inspection reports from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) show that dealers that allow straw purchasers to take place are often allowed to stay in business. ATF reports highlight that straw purchasing is the leading means by which criminals are able to gain access to guns. Access matters. A 2018 study in the Journal of the American Medical Association finds that access to firearms is a significant contributor to gun violence, and that restricting access is positively correlated with an overall reduction in mortality from gun violence. Restricting access and making it

## WE RELY ON A TRIPARTITE STRATEGY



harder for criminals to get guns will thus ultimately result in a reduction of gun crime.

Though we focus on stemming the flow of crime guns into communities, success is not defined solely as shutting down bad dealers. Ultimately, success is seen through a reduction of gun violence. To achieve success, we must simultaneously work with impacted communities and law enforcement, groups that given the recent attention on police shootings are often in tension with one another. This requires a framing of our activities both as promoting social and economic justice, and as strengthening law and order. Broadly speaking, **this requires engaging in a tripartite engagement strategy: Educate, Identify, Reform.**

### EDUCATE

Misperceptions about gun violence, especially in impacted communities, abound. Headlines such as: “Chicago community fears for safety after mass shooting wounds 3 innocent kids,” “North Minneapolis community frustrated by violence as they mourn young man’s death,” “Texas Community Comes To Terms With Latest School Shooting,” “Gangs, Opioids Fueling Spate of Violence in New Orleans, Police Say,” and “Chicago’s Deadly Summer: Guns, Gangs, and the Legacy of Racial Inequality” emphasize a focus on the shooter and chronic violence. They allow for the myth that “bad guys” will always get guns to perpetuate crimes,

and paint gun violence as an “us vs. them” problem rather than a systemic, public health issue that we can all play a part in solving. The first step in engaging in meaningful change is thus to educate the public – focusing on several key constituencies – on the reality of crime guns and gun violence in general. Areas of education fall into two key areas:

- The social and economic justice consequences of irresponsible dealers enabling the proliferation of crime guns.
- The importance of identifying the source of a crime gun in addition to the individual that committed a crime.

Irresponsible gun dealers are a scourge on impacted communities. Further, they participate in an economic system that contributes to systemic poverty. Most of the cities most impacted by gun violence do not have many federally licensed gun dealers within their city limits. Instead, they sit outside the communities that are most affected, frequently in more affluent suburbs, and profit off of irresponsible or illegal sales that drive dozens of guns into cities. According to ATF’s most recent federal firearms listing, there are no licensed dealers in Oakland and Baltimore. Chicago, Los Angeles, and Milwaukee only have a small handful. Legally purchased guns are not coming from within the community where they are being used. Trying to solve a largely localized problem by engaging with geographically removed actors is a difficult

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strategy. However, by engaging in the process of discovery with those that are the most victimized, we will be positioned to amplify their voices. We will work to highlight the ways in which guns being trafficked into impacted communities perpetuates systemic racism and economic injustice.

In addition to education why crime guns are inherently a social justice issue, it is important to simultaneously highlight the current criminal justice inequity by which only the “trigger puller” is identified and prosecuted. We must emphasize how it is critical to also identify and hold responsible the source of the gun used. As long as guns keep entering a community, there will be individuals willing to engage in gun crime. Cutting off the supply-side is a theory in several arenas, including ours. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, for instance, define military counterinsurgency in part as addressing the “root causes” of insurgency. And the supply-side approach to drugs is often discussed as stopping the initial flow of drugs across the U.S. border. Even within our borders, Americans are looking at the source of the opioid epidemic, going as far as to recommend doctors limit the number of opioids they prescribe. Human trafficking and prostitution has also been approached in this manner, with those who profit from the victimization of others being targeted rather than prostitutes. In much the same way as in these examples, it is therefore essential to stop the access to guns to prevent similarly unwanted outcomes.

Part of emphasizing the source of the crime gun also includes educating dealers on the dangers of straw purchasers and how to spot and avoid them. Straw purchasers often don’t “look like” criminals. It is important that dealers be part of the conversation in order to make them part of the solution. We must also change the incentives for dealers, to make it more profitable for them to act responsibly. We can do this by, among other activities, suing them, making responsible conduct a pre-condition for insurance coverage, and pressuring the ATF to revoke the licenses of those who arm criminals.

A robust public education campaign also requires media engagement. The media, both conventional and social, is necessary to change perceptions on crime guns and highlight the importance of identifying the source of crime guns. Rather than focusing only on trigger pullers, we will encourage the media to tell the story of the source of guns, tracing them to their origin that is likely counties or even states away. This will promote a holistic view of crime guns, showing that the “problem” reaches far beyond the impacted community. Additionally, it is essential for the media to ask about the source of crime guns at press conferences and meetings. Demanding transparency of the source will help to highlight the importance of cutting off supply to reduce gun violence.

## IDENTIFY

Education is an important first step, but it is incomplete without identification. Change cannot happen in the dark; we must shine a light on both the sources of crime guns and the tangible roads to change. Identification includes:

- 1** Irresponsible dealers that are enabling the proliferation of crime guns. Publishing trace reports at the local and the state level that name dealers is essential for this identification. Both law enforcement and elected officials are necessary to make trace reports that identify dealers available to the public. Publicly available data is essential to drive meaningful change. Many of the guns used in crime originate from dealers outside the city limits. Cooperation between jurisdictions is often necessary to hold dealers accountable of their actions. Public data allows cities, counties and states to work together to develop strategies that will address the root cause and address bad dealers. Through working to convene groups, Brady can act as a conduit for local agencies to share best practices and encourage a comprehensive approach to targeting the source of crime guns.
- 2** Identifying irresponsible dealers nationally, via ATF. Brady requested information on gun dealers that failed inspections, and a court ordered ATF to provide those documents. This information has identified hundreds of bad dealers and patterns of law-breaking conduct by them.
- 3** Responsible dealers that are willing to commit to a code of conduct. In addition to punishing “bad” dealers, it is important to identify responsible dealers and use positive reinforcement. After educating dealers on the reality of straw purchasers and the role that they play in the proliferation of crime guns, we will identify those dealers willing to be models of responsibility through adopting the Brady Code of Conduct, or even portions thereof. Holding up positive examples will help us to engage the business community and further engage law enforcement in promoting supply-side responsibility.
- 4** Partners in impacted communities that are doing work to provide alternatives to gun violence. Additionally, groups that focus on criminal justice reform are key allies in our work. Success of the program is an overall reduction in crime. Brady relies on strategic partnerships to ensure that there is an option as an alternative to violence and that law enforcement has more robust tools to engage in comprehensive reform. Organizations like Safe and Sound and Oakland Unite that focus on youth development and law enforcement engagement are key partners. As we work to stop the flow of guns into communities, they work to provide opportunities for youth. Ours is a supply side approach; complementing it with the work of partners doing demand side work will accelerate the pace of change and reduce violent crime.

## REFORM

Reformative change is a first step for success in combating crime guns. We aim to see reform in the following areas:

- 1** Gun dealers adopting the code of conduct to ensure that the supply of crime guns is minimized.
- 2** Law enforcement looking beyond the trigger puller to the source of the gun and adopting supply-side tactics in community policing.
- 3** Elected officials adopting policies that allow for oversight and active regulation of dealers, such as state and city licensing, as well as publicly releasing trace data at the city and state level.
- 4** Impacted communities revitalized with a return to foot traffic and opportunities for residents.

Media and journalists being fully trained and educated around the issue of crime guns, so they can write responsibly about this issue and act as another source on the ground to pressure law enforcement to trace firearms to their source and publicly release this information. Training journalists will also help prevent irresponsible reporting that places blame for gun violence within the communities that are most affected by crime guns.

Achieving reform involves a variety of tactics. Many dealers are ready and willing to adopt the code of conduct. However, others require pressure. Reform sometimes means suing dealers on behalf of victims of gun violence (a tactic that also strengthens our relationships with impacted communities and garners media attention), and forcing legal action to shut them down. However, there are also non-legal tactics of pressuring reform. Social media campaigns highlighting bad dealers, fliers in the parking lots of bad dealers, and protests all can pressure dealers into reforming their irresponsible or illegal practices. Such actions also raise awareness of irresponsible dealers and help to put pressure on them. In particular, it allows for engagement with gun owners - both civilians and law enforcement - as to how to make responsible choices when purchasing a firearm. The “power of the purse” of gun owners financially supporting responsible dealers while isolating irresponsible ones is another valuable tactic for pressuring dealers to reform.

A supply-side approach to combating crime guns targets the issue at its source. Through this strategy of educate, identify, and reform comes our theory of change for combating crime guns.



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