Federal gun prosecutions have been a significant part of the federal docket for decades. In this Article, we explore for the first time the evolution of federal gun crimes. They cover conduct ranging from gun distribution and possession of particular weapons such as machine guns to use by drug traffickers and individual possession of firearms by felons. Second, we describe how in practice gun charges have adapted to criminal law priorities of Congress and federal prosecutors over time. More recently, they became prominent in connection with immigration prosecutions, while in the 1980s, drug gangs were the priority. During this time, gun cases provided vehicles for testing the reach of federal jurisdiction, the use of federal crimes as sentencing enhancements, and the boundaries between federal, state, and local enforcement.

We argue federal gun crimes reflect a unique dynamic in which legislation is shaped by three forces: (1) aggressive interest group lobbying that leads to compromise on harsh punishment; (2) a dichotomizing of gun users into either “law-abiding citizens” or “thugs” and “gangsters”; and (3) prosecutorial power that is magnified in this area due to the ubiquity of firearms in communities and in criminal activity in the United States, which both permits broad federal jurisdiction and allows prosecutors to use their equally broad discretion to leverage severe sentences to obtain plea bargains. Our overall goal is to illuminate the central, but inconsistent and complex, place of gun crimes in federal criminal law. We conclude by asking what principles could guide the development of this body of law through judicial interpretation, future legislation, and in enforcement, towards a new vision in which federal law is designed to reduce disparities in enforcement and to prevent gun violence.
INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 639
I. FEDERAL FIREARMS STATUTES ......................................................................... 646
   A. Early Federal Firearms Crimes ..................................................................... 646
      1. The National Firearms Act (1934) ......................................................... 646
      2. The Federal Firearms Act (1938) ......................................................... 649
   B. The Transition to a Focus on Possession .................................................. 652
      1. The Gun Control Act of 1968 ............................................................... 652
      4. Firearms Owners Protection Act (1986) ............................................. 662
   C. Toward Modern Regulatory Approaches ................................................. 665
      1. The Brady Act (1993) ........................................................................... 665
      3. The NICS Improvement Amendments Act of 2007 ................. 671
II. FEDERAL ENFORCEMENT OF GUN OFFENSES ............................................ 672
    A. Data on Federal Gun Prosecutions ....................................................... 673
    B. Collaborative Enforcement ..................................................................... 678
    C. Immigration Prosecution and Guns ....................................................... 683
III. TOWARDS A UNIFIED VIEW OF FEDERAL GUN CRIMES ......................... 684
    A. The Patterns ......................................................................................... 684
       1. The Severity Compromise ................................................................. 685
       2. The Enforcement Emphasis ............................................................. 688
       3. The Limited Judicial Check ............................................................. 690
    B. The Pathologies .................................................................................... 694
       1. A Broken Proportionality ................................................................. 694
       2. Race- and Class-Based Inequities ................................................... 695
    C. The Path Forward ................................................................................ 697
       1. Reforms Internal to the Criminal-Law Paradigm ..................... 697
       2. Reforms That Take Us Beyond the Criminal Law ................. 698
CONCLUSION ........................................................................................................... 701
APPENDIX: STATUTORY CHANGES TO 18 U.S.C. § 924(C) .................. 704

†††

††† Lecturing Fellow, Duke University School of Law & Executive Director, Duke Center for Firearms Law; Associate Professor of Law, Pepperdine University Caruso School of Law (effective summer 2022). Many thanks to participants at a works in progress roundtable and a faculty workshop at Duke Law School, to participants at a junior scholar’s workshop organized by David Simon, and to Sara Sun Beale, Jeffrey Bellin, Joseph Blocher, Brian Bornstein, Jamie Boyle, Curt Bradley, Sam Buell, Ajenai Clemmons, Philip Cook, Deborah DeMott, Ben Grунwald, Dave Kopel, Darrell Miller, Justin Murray, Daniel Rice, Eric Ruben, and Jonathan Weiner for invaluable comments on earlier drafts. We thank Brendan Clemente, Zane Martin, and Lily Tran for their excellent research assistance.

††† L. Neil Williams Professor of Law, Duke University School of Law.
INTRODUCTION

Gun violence is a pervasively American problem. More than 100,000 Americans are injured in shootings each year, and nearly 40,000 are killed.\(^1\) The federal government has largely approached this problem through the lens—and with the tools—of the criminal law. Federal gun charges are a mainstay of federal criminal practice, comprising about ten percent of all federal prosecutions for the past several decades, and a higher percentage in recent years.\(^2\) Some of the most serious mandatory minimum sentences are for gun offenses, when linked to violent and drug-related crimes.\(^3\) As of 2016, about fifteen percent of all persons in federal prisons were convicted of gun offenses that carry a mandatory minimum penalty.\(^4\) The trajectory of these federal gun crimes—and the crime-control approach to gun violence itself—helps to explain the steady growth in prosecutions and the stark racial disparities among gun offenders in federal prisons today.\(^5\) It also helps suggest a vision for a way forward.\(^6\)

This Article traces the evolution of the wide spectrum of federal gun crimes, which cover conduct ranging from gun manufacturing, distribution, and sales to use by drug traffickers and the individual possession of guns by those with felony convictions.\(^7\) We show how federal prosecutions adapted to the criminal law priorities of Congress over time. Such charges have increased in recent years, as they did in the early 2000s.\(^8\) More recently, they have become prominent in immigration-related prosecutions, while in the 1980s,

---


\(^2\) See infra Part II.B.

\(^3\) See infra Part II.

\(^4\) U.S. SENT’G COMM’N, MANDATORY MINIMUM PENALTIES FOR FIREARMS OFFENSES IN THE FEDERAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM 45, 75 n.75 (2018) (reporting that 14.9% of federal prisoners were convicted for violating § 924(c), which carries a mandatory prison sentence); see also U.S. SENT’G COMM’N, QUICK FACTS: FEDERAL OFFENDERS IN PRISON—MARCH 2021 (2021), https://www.ussc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/quick-facts/BOP_March2021.pdf [https://perma.cc/W3AP-LTM8] (noting that 19,473 of 135,550 persons serving time for a federal conviction in federal prison were convicted of firearms offenses).

\(^5\) U.S. SENT’G COMM’N, MANDATORY MINIMUM PENALTIES FOR FIREARMS OFFENSES IN THE FEDERAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM 6 (2018) (reporting that Black Americans accounted for more than half of all offenders convicted of a firearm offense carrying a mandatory minimum penalty); see also U.S. SENT’G COMM’N, QUICK FACTS: Felon in Possession of a Firearm 1 (2020) (reporting same for offenders convicted of unlawfully possessing a firearm as a felon).

\(^6\) Although the majority of criminal prosecutions for gun crimes tend to happen at the state and local level, we focus on the federal government because it has often been a focal point for interest-group lobbying on gun issues, holds the most resources for criminal prosecution and punishment, and often influences state-level legislation and enforcement priorities.

\(^7\) See infra Part I.

drug gangs were the target.\(^9\) Over time, firearms cases have provided vehicles for testing the reach of federal criminal jurisdiction, the use of federal crimes as sentencing enhancements, and the boundaries—and synergies—between federal and local enforcement.

Many observers have raised federalism concerns regarding these developments, including the Supreme Court, in landmark rulings.\(^{10}\) William Stuntz emphasized: “Local district attorneys can threaten to send drug or gun crime defendants to the nearest U.S. Attorney’s office . . . . Federal law acts as an unfunded mandate, raising state sentencing levels without paying for the increase.”\(^{11}\) The focus has been on what Markus Dubber calls the "offense of possession—whether of drugs, of guns, or anything else—[which] has emerged as the policing device of choice in the war on crime."\(^{12}\)

We argue that federal gun crimes are not just a microcosm of larger, evolving trends in federal criminal priorities, but rather a distinct—and in many ways unique—body of law that can be better understood as such.\(^{13}\) They reflect a dynamic in which three factors dominate: (1) legislation is shaped by aggressive interest group lobbying that ends in compromise on harsh punishment; (2) judges and lawmakers dichotomize guns, as between “law-

---

9 See infra Section II.C.


12 Markus Dirk Dubber, Policing Possession: The War on Crime and the End of Criminal Law, 91 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 829, 855 (2001). Regarding the question of whether possession must be active, see Bailey v. United States, 516 U.S. 137, 143 (1995), which holds that the "use" requirement of § 924(c) "requires evidence sufficient to show an active employment" of a firearm; and Bousley v. United States, 523 U.S. 164, 166 (1998), which applies Bailey. See also Angela LaBuda Collins, The Latest Amendment to 18 U.S.C. §924(c): Congressional Reaction to the Supreme Court’s Interpretation of the Statute, 48 CATH. U. L. REV. 139, 1349-50 (1999) ("Congress added the term ‘possession’ to §924(c)(1) in order to broaden the application of the statute beyond the Supreme Court’s prior interpretation of the ‘use’ prong.").

13 The specific combination of these three factors leads us to find the trajectory of federal gun crimes unique, but there are certainly aspects of this trajectory that have been replicated in the history of other federal crimes, such as in drug crimes. Taleed El-Sabawi, for example, has explored how competing interest groups helped frame the government’s approach to drug use and crimes, explaining:

Due in part to the participation of physicians, drug manufacturers, and pharmacists in the problem-definition discourse, the use and possession of morphine, heroin, and cocaine remained licit for medicinal purposes throughout the early 1900s . . . . In essence, the medical industry lobbied Congress to keep these substances licit for medicinal purposes, while advocating for the punishment of marginalized populations’ illicit or recreational use.

Taleed El-Sabawi, Defining the Opioid Epidemic: Congress, Pressure Groups, and Problem Definition, 48 U. MEM. L. REV. 1357, 1400 (2018); see also Taleed El-Sabawi, The Role of Pressure Groups and Problem Definition in Crafting Legislative Solutions to the Opioid Crisis, 11 NE. U. L. REV. 372, 375 (2019) (explaining that interest groups “have historically been influential in defining problem drug use during nationwide crisis”).
abiding citizens”14 in contrast to use by thugs and “gangsters”;15 and (3) prosecutorial power is magnified in this area due to the ubiquity of firearms in communities and in criminal activity in the United States, which both permits broad federal jurisdiction and allows prosecutors to use their equally broad discretion to leverage severe sentences to obtain plea bargains.16 In surveying the nine decades of federal policymaking around gun crimes, we see an increasingly dynamic, interactive approach that bears the marks of these themes.17 All three branches of government have been critical in shaping the current framework. In the last forty years, Congress has drafted gun crimes expansively, the Executive has enforced them aggressively, and the Supreme Court has interpreted them frequently.

The severe penalties that Congress has prescribed for crimes connected to guns has led to increased prosecutorial power to wield those penalties. The combination of tough laws and tough enforcors has led to a Supreme Court especially active in construing the federal firearms laws. We count more than seventy-five high court opinions since 1937 interpreting the major pieces of federal legislation; almost all of those cases came after the Gun Control Act of 1968.18 And the Roberts Court has had a special fondness for federal

14 District of Columbia v. Heller, 554 U.S. 570, 635 (2008) (holding that the Second Amendment “elevates above all other interests the right of law-abiding, responsible citizens to use arms in defense of hearth and home”).


16 Of course, this prosecutorial power is, as we discuss infra, enabled and guided by other system actors like legislators and judges, as well as by presidential administrations and Attorney General priorities. See generally Jeffrey Bellin, The Power of Prosecutors, 94 N.Y.U. L. REV. 171 (2019) (discussing how prosecutorial power is circumscribed in myriad ways).

17 See infra Part III.

firearms crimes. The Court has heard more than thirty cases arising under these laws since 2005.\(^{19}\)

Cases concerning federal gun crimes have made blockbuster constitutional law, including under the Second,\(^{20}\) Fourth,\(^{21}\) Fifth,\(^{22}\) Sixth,\(^{23}\) and Tenth Amendments,\(^{24}\) as well as with respect to Congress’s Commerce Clause authority\(^{25}\) and taxing power.\(^{26}\) But these cases have more frequently involved difficult questions of statutory construction,\(^{27}\) requiring the Court


\(^{19}\) See cases cited supra note 18.

\(^{20}\) See Miller, 307 U.S. 174, 175, 183 (upholding the National Firearms Act against a Second Amendment challenge).

\(^{21}\) Brinia, 406 U.S. 311, 313-14 (finding no Fourth Amendment violation in the authorization for warrantless search of federal firearm licensees).

\(^{22}\) See Haynes, 390 U.S. 85, 100 (finding the National Firearms Act’s requirement to report an unregistered firearm in violation of the Fifth Amendment’s protection against self-incrimination); Johnson v. United States, 576 U.S. 591, 597 (2015) (finding the residual clause of the Armed Career Criminal Act unconstitutionally vague, in violation of Fifth Amendment due process); United States v. Davis, 139 S. Ct. 2319, 2336 (2019) (finding § 924(c)’s residual clause void-for-vagueness under the Fifth Amendment).

\(^{23}\) Alleyne, 570 U.S. 99, 117 (holding in a § 924(c) prosecution that the Sixth Amendment requires any fact that increases the punishment for a crime to be proved to a jury); Rodriguez-Moreno, 536 U.S. 275, 276 (considering where venue is proper for a § 924(c) charge under the Sixth Amendment).


\(^{25}\) See Printz v. United States, 521 U.S. 898 (1997) (striking down portions of the Brady Act that temporarily required local law enforcement to conduct background checks on gun purchasers).

\(^{26}\) See Sonzinsky v. United States, 300 U.S. 506, 514 (1937) (upholding the National Firearms Act as a valid exercise of the taxing power).

\(^{27}\) In just one decade after the enactment of the Gun Control Act of 1968, the Court decided five major cases interpreting the statute. See United States v. Bass, 404 U.S. 336 (1971) (construing the ban on felon firearm possession); Hudspeth v. United States, 415 U.S. 814, 815 (1974) (construing the law criminalizing false statements in connection with acquiring a firearm); Barrett v. United States, 423 U.S. 212 (1976) (construing the ban on a felon’s receipt of a firearm);
to, in Justice Kagan’s pithy phrase, leave the “lofty sphere of constitutionalism for the grittier precincts of criminal law.”28 Since penalties for these crimes have become so severe, the Court’s attention to these matters has accordingly taken on heightened importance.29 The Court, for its part, has often read statutes in the harshest light.30 As the Court said in one case construing 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)’s stiff sentences for use, carrying, or possession of a firearm in connection with certain crimes: “We do not gainsay that [the petitioners] project a rational, less harsh, mode of sentencing. But we do not think it was the mode Congress ordered.”31 And Congress, when it believes the Court has read a statute too leniently, has not hesitated to clarify its purpose by amending statutes to cement more punitive constructions of the law.32


28 Puerto Rico v. Sanchez Valle, 136 S. Ct. 1865, 1869 (2016); see also id. at 1868 (holding that the United States and Puerto Rico are not separate sovereigns for Double Jeopardy purposes in charging gun crimes).

29 E.g., Johnson v. United States, 576 U.S. 591, 602 (2015) (striking down the residual clause of the Armed Career Criminals Act, remarking that “[i]nvoking so shapeless a provision to condemn someone to prison for 15 years to life does not comport with the Constitution’s guarantee of due process”); United States v. Thompson/Ctr. Arms Co., 504 U.S. 505, 507-08 (1992) (plurality opinion) (invoking the rule of lenity in a National Firearms Act case in part because the consequences of deciding for the government on an ambiguous provision were “serious,” with the Act carrying “criminal penalties of up to 10 years’ imprisonment and a fine of up to $10,000, or both, which may be imposed without proof of willfulness or knowledge”).

30 See, e.g., Abramski v. United States, 573 U.S. 169, 193 (2014) (holding that a misrepresentation as to actual buyer is a materially false statement even if actual buyer and straw buyer could both legally purchase and possess firearms).

The Court has, in recent years, grown seemingly more cognizant of what can sometimes seem like a gratuitous severity in the penalties. See, e.g., Dean v. United States, 137 S. Ct. 1707, 176 (2017) (‘‘Dean committed the two robberies at issue here when he was 23 years old. That he will not be released from prison until well after his fiftieth birthday because of the § 924(c) convictions surely bears on whether—in connection with his predicate crimes—still more incarceration is necessary to protect the public.’’).


32 Consider just two examples. In Basic v. United States, 446 U.S. 398, 399-400 (1980), the Court held that § 924(c)’s extra punishment did not apply if the underlying predicate offense was itself a firearm offense. Four years later, Congress rejected that approach and clarified it did apply in those circumstances. See Abbott, 562 U.S. at 23 (2010) (describing how Congress’ amendment of §924(c) in 1984 “repealed” the Court’s prior holding in Basic (quoting United States v. Gonzales, 520 U.S. 1, 10 (1997))]. In Bailey v. United States, 516 U.S. 137 (1995), the Court held that mere possession of a firearm during a relevant crime does not count as “use” of a firearm for purposes of the § 924(c) enhancements. Three years later, “Congress responded to Bailey by amending § 924(c)(1). The amendment broadened the provision to cover a defendant who ‘merely possesses a firearm in furtherance of a qualifying crime. Watson v. United States, 552 U.S. 74, 77 n.3 (2007).

One notable exception is the Firearms Owners’ Protection Act, which generally provided greater solicitude for gun dealers and potential dealers and also for those who had received state relief from their convictions. See infra Part I.B.
The existing literature on federal gun crimes does not give a holistic picture of the history, trends, and effects of this body of law. Most scholarship on gun regulation tends to focus either on the Second Amendment’s right to keep and bear arms or on narrow aspects of criminal enforcement or judicial interpretation. The former literature often includes little or no discussion of criminal enforcement, including the severe mandatory minimums penalties that have become an increasingly important part of the federal framework. The latter literature often focuses narrowly on one substantive provision or piece of legislation without linking these to the broader, evolving context. The result is separate literatures about “gun control” and about federal criminal law that speak to different audiences and for different purposes.

This Article bridges that divide. It describes the arc of federal criminal gun laws, from provisions focusing on regulating commercial manufacturing, distribution, and sale of firearms; to an extensive focus on individuals, in order to target a wide range of gun-related but also not primarily gun-related criminal conduct; to a broader federal, systematic, and collaborative effort to

---

33 See, e.g., Jeffrey Bellin, The Right to Remain Armed, 93 WASH. U.L. REV. 1, 4-5 (2015) (discussing the constitutionality under the Fourth Amendment of gun possession as a basis for police search and seizure); Joseph Blocher, Gun Rights Talk, 94 B.U. L. REV. 813, 812 (2014) (outlining the gap between constitutional rhetoric and doctrine on the issue of firearms); Pratheepan Gulasekaram, “The People” of the Second Amendment: Citizenship and the Right to Bear Arms, 85 N.Y.U. L. REV. 1521, 1538 (2010) (discussing the implications of the protected class identified in the Heller decision); Fredrick E. Vars, Symptom-Based Gun Control, 46 CONN. L. REV. 1633, 1646-47 (2014) (arguing that due process would not be violated if police or mental health professionals had the power to confiscate firearms from individuals suffering delusions or hallucinations); Luke Morgan, Note, Leave Your Guns at Home: The Constitutionality of a Prohibition on Carrying Firearms at Political Demonstrations, 68 DUKE L.J. 175, 179, 211-13 (2018) (“[C]ourts should adopt the following test: a place is sensitive under Heller when introducing guns into that place seriously threatens core First Amendment interests or activity.”).

34 See, e.g., ALEXANDER DECONDE, GUN VIOLENCE IN AMERICA: THE STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL (2001) (surveying in depth the history of federal gun laws but with only passing references to mandatory minimum penalties); William J. Vizzard, The Current and Future State of Gun Policy in the United States, 104 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 879, 879-87 (2015) [hereinafter Vizzard, Current and Future Policy] (providing a summary of federal gun regulations but mentioning existing sentencing penalties only in passing); PATRICK J. CHARLES, ARMED IN AMERICA: A HISTORY OF GUN RIGHTS FROM COLONIAL MILITIAS TO CONCEALED CARRY (2018) (providing a history of gun rights and regulation without focusing on criminal penalties).

35 For a detailed exploration of how enhanced sentences have expanded jurisdiction and reshaped enforcement, see Sara Sun Beale, The Unintended Consequences of Enhancing Gun Penalties: Shooting Down the Commerce Clause and Arming Federal Prosecutors, 51 DUKE L.J. 1641, 1643 (2002). For another important exception in the literature—a detailed examination of race and class critiques of federal gun enforcement—see Benjamin Levin, Guns and Drugs, 84 FORDHAM L. REV. 2173, 2179-84 (2016).

36 Cf. William J. Vizzard, The Impact of Agenda Conflict on Policy Formulation and Implementation: The Case of Gun Control, 55 PUB. ADMIN. REV. 341, 345 (1995) [hereinafter Vizzard, Impact] (“[O]pponents characterize gun control as the alternative to strategies such as mandatory sentencing, while defining legitimate control strategies as those that exclusively and immediately impact known criminals.”).
target gun violence. We question why the crime-control paradigm has been central to federal efforts to combat gun violence, how this focus has ignored the underlying causes of that violence, and how the federal government might play a less punitive role.

In Part I, we describe the enactment and substance of the major federal gun crimes legislation. We start in Section A with the beginning of federal firearms regulation—the 1934 National Firearms Act (“NFA”), which levied taxes on manufacturers and owners of certain types of especially dangerous firearms, like machine guns. In Section B, we detail statutes, starting in the late 1960s and continuing through the 1980s and 1990s, that cemented the focus on individual possession offenses and harsh punishment. In Section C, we describe more recent statutes that have focused on upstream regulatory gun laws, like background checks.

In Part II, we discuss how these criminal statutes are enforced. Using U.S. Administrative Office of the Courts data we compiled for this Article, we emphasize how, despite the proliferation of weapons offenses, felon-in-possession offenses have dominated prosecutions beginning in the 1980s, with a steady rise in the number and length of sentences in each decade since. We also describe other changes in enforcement, including the creation of national data-tracking; the building of federal, state, and local partnerships to combat gun violence; and new uses of gun-charges as federal prosecution priorities have changed, including a focus on gun-charges in immigration enforcement.

In Part III, we step back to identify the patterns, probe the pathologies, and chart the path forward to a more reasonable and coherent approach to the federal regulation of guns. We suggest these statutes share a remarkable legislative dynamic, in which powerful interests are arrayed on both sides. A compromise between otherwise antagonistic parties leads to agreement on harsher penalties and more severe punishment. We also describe how institutional forces and administrative enforcement priorities have shaped the use of these statutes. Finally, we examine the two-fold effects of this system on inequality, where under-resourced minoritized communities are both disproportionately victims of gun violence and targeted by federal sentencing. We ask why successful community-based efforts to prevent gun violence have not received strong federal support. And we conclude by asking what principles could guide the development of this body of federal firearms law through judicial interpretation, future legislation, and enforcement towards a new vision in which federal gun efforts serve primarily to prevent gun violence.

I. FEDERAL FIREARMS STATUTES

This Part provides a three-part account of the evolution of federal gun crimes in the United States. In Section A, we set out the origins of the earliest gun crimes. In Section B, we detail federal statutes that cemented a focus on punishing individual firearm possession and imposing severe sentences. In Section C, we describe more recent statutes that have typically focused on regulatory measures, such as background checks.

A. Early Federal Firearms Crimes

As early as 1945, political scientist David Fellman observed that “federal criminal jurisdiction has steadily expanded from humble beginnings into the vast complex of power it is today.”38 Two major laws regulating firearms in the 1930s formed part of this federal expansion: the National Firearms Act (“NFA”) and Federal Firearms Act (“FFA”). These, it turns out, would be the federal government’s only major firearm regulations for the next three decades—decades in which the nature of commerce, crime, and national power changed dramatically.

1. The National Firearms Act (1934)

The NFA was the federal government’s first substantial entry into the field of firearms regulation.39 It came at a time ripe for federal intervention: “The late 1920s and early 1930s brought . . . a growing perception of crime both as a major problem and as a national one.”40 State and local authorities, which had been expanding their regulation over weapon possession and carrying, were incapable of addressing the increasing mobility of crime and criminals.41

---

38 David Fellman, Some Consequences of Increased Federal Activity in Law Enforcement, 35 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 16, 16 (1944).
39 The only prior federal firearms regulation was a 1927 ban on mailing concealable firearms through the U.S. Postal Service (but not through private carriers). Act of Feb. 8, 1927, Pub. L. No. 69-583, 44 Stat. 1059 (codified as amended at 18 U.S.C. § 1715); see also ROBERT J. SPITZER, THE POLITICS OF GUN CONTROL 185 (7th ed. 2018) (“This measure passed when other gun control efforts failed because its supporters justified it as a measure that supported, rather than eroded, state sovereignty.”).
41 See Carol Skalnik Leff & Mark H. Leff, The Politics of Ineffectiveness: Federal Firearms Legislation, 1919–38, 455 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 48, 49 (1981) (“This upsurge of federal activism was in large part a response to problems encountered in the enforcement of state legislation.”).
The battle over the NFA was heated. The primary locus of dispute was not the Second Amendment, however, but instead whether the federal or state government should be the entity responsible for firearm regulations. Another battle concerned what the law should cover. As initially conceived by Attorney General Homer Cummings, the law would have required the registration of machine guns, as well as concealable weapons such as pistols, revolvers, and short-barrel shotguns or rifles. The inclusion of pistols and revolvers in the law generated significant controversy.

The National Rifle Association proved successful at organizing grassroots support to thwart the handgun registration component. The NFA ultimately regulated only a small subset of firearms thought particularly useful for criminal activity through a registration and taxation regime.

First, the NFA required all manufacturers, importers, and dealers of “firearms” to register with the government and pay an annual tax. Reflecting

42 See John Brabner-Smith, Firearm Regulation, 1 L. & CONTEMP. PROBS. 400, 400 (1934) (“Among these bills sponsored by the Attorney General of the United States, Homer S. Cummings, none has received more general attention and bitter criticism than the bill proposing to regulate the manufacture, importation, and disposition of certain types of firearms.”).

43 The Second Amendment was almost entirely an afterthought. See National Firearms Act: Hearings on H.R. 9066 Before the H. Comm. on Ways & Means, 73rd Cong. 53 (1934). Almost all of the debate took place in terms of what level of government—state or federal—was the proper entity to regulate deadly weapons. Indeed, in response to DOJ concerns about gangsters traveling with private arsenals escaping federal authority, Congressman (and future Supreme Court Justice) Fred Vinson, an opponent of the bill, asked the DOJ’s witness whether there would be anything to stop a state “from making it a penalty punishable with death to carry a revolver.” Id. at 119. The DOJ’s witness replied he supposed it would be within a state’s police power to do so: “[T]here would be no restriction on a sovereignty to pass a law with respect to anything that affected the public welfare of that sovereignty.” Id. Neither suggested such a draconian law enacted at the state level might run afoul of the Second Amendment. But that does not mean the “theory of individual rights” was altogether absent; there was some brief discussion about how prohibition and not regulation could impact the right to keep and bear arms. Id. at 18-19.

44 See, e.g., Sara Sun Beale, Federalizing Crime: Assessing the Impact on the Federal Courts, 143 ANNALS AM. ACADEMY OF POL. & SOC. SCI. 39, 42 (1996) (“These enactments reflected a willingness on the part of the Congress that had enacted the New Deal social and economic legislation to assert jurisdiction over an increasingly broad range of conduct clearly within the traditional police powers of the states.”).

45 See David B. Kopel, The Great Gun Control War of the Twentieth Century—and Its Lessons for Gun Laws Today, 39 FORDHAM URB. L.J. 1527, 1533 (2012) (“Cummings was . . . highly interested in gun control. His objective was national registration for all firearms, and the de facto prohibition of handguns.”).

46 See SPITZER, supra note 39, at 186 (“Even in this early stage, the NRA spearheaded the antiregulation movement.”); F.J.K, Restrictions on the Right to Bear Arms: State and Federal Firearms Legislation, 98 U. PA. L. REV. 905, 917 (1950) (reporting inclusion of handguns “met strong organized opposition from sportsmen and rifle associations, with the result that reference to pistols and revolvers was deleted, and a pure revenue measure, on its face, enacted”).


48 Id. § 2.
its narrowed reach, the Act defined “firearms” in a technical way to only include machine guns, short-barrel shotguns or rifles, and silencers.\(^{49}\)

Second, the NFA created an excise tax on firearm transfers (the first federal excise tax on firearm purchases had been adopted in 1919). It mandated specific paperwork and record-keeping requirements to document payment of the transfer tax, the serial number of the firearm transferred, and the identity of the person taking possession.\(^{50}\) With the requirements for documentation accompanying each transfer, the Act created a comprehensive (or nearly so) record of the ownership and chain of title for each covered firearm.\(^{51}\) To make the system reasonably complete, anyone who already possessed a covered weapon at the time of the NFA’s enactment had 60 days to record, “with the collector of the district in which he resides, the number or other mark identifying such firearm, together with his name, address, place where such firearm is usually kept, and place of business or employment.”\(^{52}\)

In implementing this regime, the NFA created a number of new federal crimes, each carrying a potential prison term of up to five years.\(^{53}\) But, in what would be a harbinger of implementation woes, Congress vested enforcement authority in the Commissioner of Internal Revenue.\(^ {54}\) The Revenue Bureau did not prioritize enforcement of the Act.\(^ {55}\) Yet at least one notable prosecution arose, nonetheless. In *United States v. Miller*, two men were charged with violating the NFA by transporting an unregistered short-barrel shotgun across state lines.\(^ {56}\) The district court quashed the indictments on the ground that the NFA violated the Second Amendment.\(^ {57}\) The Supreme Court, however, reversed, holding the Act valid.\(^ {58}\)

In the absence of any evidence tending to show that possession or use of a “shotgun having a barrel of less than eighteen inches in length” at this time has some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well
regulated militia, we cannot say that the Second Amendment guarantees the right to keep and bear such an instrument.\textsuperscript{59}

Similarly, decades later, the Court again confronted a question about how to apply the Act’s steep criminal penalties. In \textit{Staples v. United States}, the Court held that to sustain a conviction for possession of an unregistered weapon—there, a machine gun—the Government had “to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that [the defendant] knew the weapon he possessed had the characteristics that brought it within the statutory definition of a machinegun.”\textsuperscript{60}

The NFA was an attempt to strike at a narrow slice of especially dangerous weapons used by a narrow slice of lawbreakers. Opponents of a broader law effectively ensured that the overwhelming majority of ordinary gun owners would feel no impact from the law.

2. The Federal Firearms Act (1938)

Just a few years later, there was another drive for federal legislation. The Federal Firearms Act, however, resulted more from industry pressure than from pro-regulation impetus. The Department of Justice, under Attorney General Cummings’s pressure, had continued in the years after the NFA’s passage to push for the inclusion of handguns in the registration and taxation system it established.\textsuperscript{61} That did not happen. “Shepherded through the Congress by the National Rifle Association, the 1938 Act was pressed” in large part to deflect from these efforts.\textsuperscript{62}

Nonetheless, the FFA “established the dominant model of federal gun control for the rest of the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{63} The FFA’s main accomplishments were (1) a more comprehensive manufacturer and dealer licensing system, and (2) the creation of a class of prohibited persons who could not receive, ship, or transport weapons. We look briefly at each.

First, the Act established that any person who manufactured or dealt in firearms of any kind, not just NFA-defined firearms, had to get a license from the Treasury Department if they shipped or received firearms in interstate

\textsuperscript{59} Id. at 178. Some scholars see \textit{Miller} as a set-up to validate new congressional power over firearms legislation. \textit{See}, e.g., Brian L. Frye, \textit{The Peculiar Story of United States v. Miller}, 3 N.Y.U. J.L. & LIBERTY 48, 50 (2008) (“\textit{Miller} was a Second Amendment test case, teed up with a nominal defendant by a district judge sympathetic to New Deal gun control measures.”).

\textsuperscript{60} 511 U.S. 600, 602 (1994).

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{See} Franklin E. Zimring, \textit{Firearms and Federal Law: The Gun Control Act of 1968}, 4 J. LEGAL STUD. 133, 138 (1975) (“When the handgun registration segment of the bill was deleted [from the NFA] in the House, the Justice Department continued to introduce handgun registration proposals, and to fight for them throughout the 1930s, long after crime control had lost its place in the hierarchy of New Deal legislative goals.”).

\textsuperscript{62} Id. at 139.

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{JAMES B. JACOBS, CAN GUN CONTROL WORK?} 22 (2002).
The license requirement was imposed on any person “engaged in the business” of selling, repairing, or manufacturing firearms interstate—a phrase the act did not define.\textsuperscript{65} Notably, a manufacturer or dealer who did not ship or receive firearms in interstate commerce, such as a gun shop serving only local customers, would not need a license under the Act.\textsuperscript{66}

Licensees (often referred to as Federal Firearm Licensees or “FFLs”) were forbidden from transferring firearms in interstate commerce to certain classes of persons, including any nonresident who did not present a purchase license if her state required one.\textsuperscript{67} Nor could licensees transfer to any person “knowing or having reasonable cause to believe”\textsuperscript{68} that the person was \textsuperscript{(1)} under indictment for or convicted of a “crime of violence”\textsuperscript{69} or \textsuperscript{(2)} a fugitive from justice.\textsuperscript{70}

The Act’s scienter requirement for forbidden transfers proved to be a major enforcement obstacle. Not only had gun-rights advocates effectively removed the bulk of private firearms from the regulatory scope of the NFA, but they also considerably weakened the ambit of the FFA’s criminal prohibitions. As Carol and Mark Leff describe,

\begin{quote}
[A] keystone of the draft bill had been the power to prosecute shippers and manufacturers who put guns into the hands of fugitives or criminals convicted of crimes of violence. The antiregulation forces, however, protested that this stricture would place an unfair burden on the commercial enterprises engaged in gun sales and transport. They offered modifying phrases that assured the act’s debilitation; businesses would be liable to penalty only if they could be convicted of “knowing or having reasonable cause to believe” that the purchaser had a criminal background.\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}

This change allowed, and even encouraged, a head-in-the-sand approach. Licensees had no incentive to check whether someone who wanted to purchase a gun was a convicted criminal, no mechanism to do so even if they

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{64} Federal Firearms Act, Pub. L. No. 75-785, § 2(a), 52 Stat. 1250, 1250 (1938), repealed by Pub. L. No. 90-351, § 906, 82 Stat. 197, 234 (1968).
\item \textsuperscript{65} Id. § 1(5).
\item \textsuperscript{66} Hardy, supra note 40, at 598-99 (explaining that the FFA only required licensing for those “engaged in the business” of interstate commerce for firearms).
\item \textsuperscript{67} Federal Firearms Act § 2(c).
\item \textsuperscript{68} Id. § 2(d).
\item \textsuperscript{69} Id. § 1(6). A “crime of violence” was defined by listing qualifying offenses: “murder, manslaughter, rape, mayhem, kidnaping, burglary, housebreaking; assault with intent to kill, commit rape, or rob; assault with a dangerous weapon, or assault with intent to commit any offense punishable by imprisonment for more than one year.” Id.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Id. § 2(d).
\item \textsuperscript{71} Leff & Leff, supra note 41, at 55.
\end{itemize}
wanted, and no legal obligation to perform any due diligence. Thus, “[f]rom the standpoint of prosecuting dealers for violation of the federal ban against sale to felons, the requirement of knowledge, coupled with the absence of a verification system, rendered the Act stillborn.”

Second, in addition to these requirements for licensees, the Act imposed restrictions directly on several groups of prohibited persons. Fugitives and those under indictment for or convicted of a crime of violence were forbidden from shipping or transporting firearms in interstate commerce or receiving guns that had been so shipped or transported. They were not, however, forbidden from merely possessing such firearms, as later legislation would provide. But the Act did make mere possession “presumptive evidence that such firearm or ammunition was shipped or transported or received . . . in violation of this Act.” As noted infra, the Supreme Court later struck down this presumption in Tot v. United States.

The proposed bill originally vested authority for enforcement in the Commerce Department, as the measure was justified under Congress’s power over interstate commerce (unlike the NFA, which was a taxing measure). Ultimately, however, the House amended the bill to place Treasury in charge. Once again, charging a Treasury Department component with enforcing the Act proved to neuter it further. “That department could summon up little interest for such a manifestly nonfinancial program.”

---

72 Additionally, the ability to prosecute gun sellers was severely hindered:

[T]he key power to prosecute those who bore responsibility for putting guns in the hands of criminals was effectively neutralized when language added in committee made successful federal prosecution dependent on being able to prove that the gun provider sold guns to criminals knowingly, a standard the Justice Department knew it could rarely if ever meet.

SPITZER, supra note 39, at 185-86

73 Zimring, supra note 61, at 140.

74 Federal Firearms Act § 2(e)–(f).


76 Id. § 2(f).

77 See infra note 84 and accompanying text.

78 Firearms: Hearing on S. 3 Before A Subcomm. of the H. Comm. on Interstate and Foreign Com., 75th Cong. 11 (1937) (describing confusion that vesting the two different federal laws on firearms in different departments would have on administration).

79 H.R. REP. NO. 75-2663 (1938).

80 Zimring, supra note 61, at 140 (noting that the FFA was "crippled by a tradition of less-than-Draconian enforcement by the Internal Revenue Service").

81 Leff & Leff, supra note 41, at 56.
The FFA imposed the same penalties as the NFA: up to five years in prison for a violation. Like the NFA, the FFA did not become a major law enforcement priority. Robert Spitzer calls it “[s]ymptomatic of the impotency of this legislation” that “fewer than one hundred arrests per year were made under any provision of the act from the 1930s to the 1960s.”

Yet, like the NFA, the criminal provisions created constitutional doctrine nonetheless. In Tot v. United States, two men challenged their convictions for receiving a firearm after having been convicted of a crime of violence. At issue in the case was the presumption that mere possession by a prohibited person was evidence the person had received the firearm in violation of the Act. The Supreme Court held the presumption not consistent with due process—“the presumptions created by the law are violent, and inconsistent with any argument drawn from experience”—and reversed the convictions.

After the FFA, the gun issue largely dropped off the national radar. As William Vizzard notes, “crime rates began a decline in 1934 that would continue for almost three decades, and the limited public and congressional interest in gun control abated.” “It would,” he observes, “take a presidential assassination to rekindle it.”

B. The Transition to a Focus on Possession

In this Section, we trace how the turmoil of the 1960s and the rising tough-on-crime politics of the 1980s and 1990s led to types of legislation that ended up cementing a focus on possession offenses and steep punishment. We turn first to (1) the Gun Control Act of 1968, and then examine (2) the Armed Career Criminal Act, (3) the Sentencing Guidelines, and (4) the Firearm Owners Protection Act.

1. The Gun Control Act of 1968

There were no major federal gun laws in the three decades between 1938 and 1968. Nor, does it seem, had federal law enforcement priorities shifted much: in 1947, the Department of Justice brought a meager 66 criminal cases...
for federal weapons offenses.\textsuperscript{90} Twenty years later, in 1967, there were still only 371 such cases brought—out of more than 30,000 total federal prosecutions.\textsuperscript{91}

What became the Gun Control Act of 1968 was debated in Congress for five years, and was eventually “signed at the height of civil unrest”\textsuperscript{92} that resulted from political protests and high-profile political assassinations.\textsuperscript{93} Part of the original impetus for the law was a post-war increase in cheap, mostly military surplus, firearms imported into the United States.\textsuperscript{94} Another reason for legislative action in the 1960s was the elevation of Connecticut Senator, and former FBI agent, Thomas Dodd to chairperson of the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency in 1961.\textsuperscript{95} Although Senator Dodd’s initial efforts to prohibit mail-order sales of handguns (and later, after JFK’s assassination, of shotguns and rifles too) failed,\textsuperscript{96} federal gun regulation was back on the table as a serious proposal.\textsuperscript{97} Meanwhile, President Lyndon Johnson’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice issued its influential report in 1967, “The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society,” which included a chapter calling for national gun laws.\textsuperscript{98}

In June 1968, in a prelude to the GCA, Congress passed the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act.\textsuperscript{99} In addition to its other major provisions, Title IV and Title VII of the Act contained new gun laws. Title IV modified the FFA and also fulfilled part of Senator Dodd’s goal of banning

\footnotesize


\textsuperscript{93} Vizzard, Current and Future Policy, supra note 34, at 882 (describing how the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. galvanized support for the GCA).


\textsuperscript{95} John Q. Barrett, From Justice Jackson to Thomas J. Dodd to Nuremberg 4 (St. John’s U. Legal Stud. Rsch. Paper Series, Paper No. 05-00, 2005); see also Zimring, supra note 61, at 145.

\textsuperscript{96} Zimring, supra note 61, at 145-46.

\textsuperscript{97} Vizzard, Gun Control Act, supra note 94, at 80 (“Between 1938 and 1965, Congress had displayed little discernable interest in gun control legislation; however, external events, administration interest, and public opinion altered the policy dynamics within Congress over the next four years and opened the policy window.”).

\textsuperscript{98} See Philip J. Cook, Challenge of Firearms Control in a Free Society, 17 Criminology & Pub. Pol’y 437, 438 (2018) (“In looking back from today’s vantage point, one can only marvel that a politically diverse national commission could reach consensus on these recommendations, which include universal gun registration and permit-to-purchase requirements. Also remarkable is that the Commission’s analysis in support of these recommendations could not draw on systematic empirical research for the simple reason that no such research had been published yet.”).

the interstate shipment of handguns to individuals. It also prohibited purchasing handguns out of state. These provisions were amended and reenacted as part of the GCA, discussed below.

Title VII of the Act put in place the first federal law barring, for specific categories of people, mere possession of a firearm in or affecting interstate commerce. The categories of people so barred were similar but not identical to those contained in Title IV (amending the FFA), which only barred those people from shipping, transporting, or receiving (but not from possessing) firearms. In that sense, “Title VII and Title IV are, in part, redundant.”

As the Supreme Court recognized a few years after it was signed into law, “Title VII was a last-minute Senate amendment . . . [that] was hastily passed, with little discussion, no hearings, and no report.” One commentator describes the rationale: Title VII “became law with little analysis largely as a political favor to improve its author’s image as tough on crime.”

Coming off the heels of that omnibus bill, Senator Dodd introduced “an administration-backed gun bill in the Senate that had as its centerpiece the registration of all firearms and licensing of gun owners.” This was not to be. The fate of these two provisions of the bill, excised after intense lobbying and grassroots organizing by the NRA, showed the group’s political clout and

---

100 Spitzer, supra note 39, at 187.
102 Vizard, Gun Control Act, supra note 94, at 84 (“Title VII addressed simple firearm possession for the first time at the federal level.”). Those classes included: (1) those with a prior felony conviction, (2) those dishonorably discharged from the armed forces, (3) those adjudged mentally incompetent, (4) those who renounced their citizenship, and (5) unlawful aliens. Id. at 88 n.77. Although the FFA banned shipment, receipt, and transport, it did not ban mere possession. See Tot v. United States, 319 U.S. 463, 472 (1943) (“It is plain that Congress, for whatever reason, did not seek to pronounce general prohibition of possession by certain residents of the various states of firearms in order to protect interstate commerce, but dealt only with their future acquisition in interstate commerce.”). The Court was mistaken when it recently described the FFA otherwise. See Rehaif v. United States, 139 S. Ct. 2191, 2198 (2019) (“Congress first enacted a criminal statute prohibiting particular categories of persons from possessing firearms in 1938.”).
103 The GCA categories included: (1) those under indictment for or convicted of a crime punishable by more than a year imprisonment, (2) fugitives from justice, (3) unlawful drug users, and (4) those adjudicated as a “mental defective” or who had previously been committed. Gun Control Act of 1968, Pub. L. No. 90-618, sec.102, § 922(h), 82 Stat. 1213, 1220-21 (codified as amended at 18 U.S.C. § 922(h)).
105 Id. at 344.
106 Vizard, Gun Control Act, supra note 94, at 84.
107 Spitzer, supra note 39, at 188.
influence over the scope of firearms regulations.\textsuperscript{108} In the resulting “compromise with the NRA,” observes David Kopel, “[t]here would be no federal licensing of gun owners. Gun sales would be registered, but only by the dealer, not the government.”\textsuperscript{109}

As signed into law, the GCA had several main components covering both the manufacturing and distribution process as well as individual-level gun use. It extended the FFA requirements mandating licensure for anyone in the business of manufacturing, importing, or dealing firearms, not just those who shipped or received such firearms in interstate commerce.\textsuperscript{110} The law also (1) banned interstate shipments of firearms to individuals, (2) increased dealer licensing and record-keeping requirements, (3) prohibited the importation of most foreign-made surplus arms, (4) added to the classes of persons prohibited from purchasing guns, and (5) increased the punishment for those who used a gun in a crime.\textsuperscript{111}

The GCA set up a dual penalty track for violations. Like the NFA and FFA before it, the GCA generally prescribed a maximum sentence of five years imprisonment for any violation, but it also singled out several acts that merited longer punishment. Anyone who shipped, transferred, or received a gun intending to commit a felony, or with reasonable cause to believe one would be committed, faced up to ten years in prison.\textsuperscript{112}

It also increased punishment for using a gun in a crime—and set a mandatory sentencing floor. In the first incarnation of \textsuperscript{113} 18 U.S.C. \textsection 924(c)’s enhancement offense, the Act provided (1) using a firearm to commit a federal felony or (2) carrying a firearm unlawfully during the commission of a federal felony would be punishable by a mandatory minimum of one year of imprisonment and a maximum of ten years. A second conviction for use or unlawful carrying under this subsection resulted in a mandatory minimum of two years and a maximum of 25 years in prison.\textsuperscript{114} For that recidivist, “notwithstanding any other provision of law, the court shall not suspend the sentence . . . of such person or give him a probationary sentence.”\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{108} Vizzard, \textit{Gun Control Act}, supra note 94, at 80-81 (describing the NRA membership’s radicalization on gun issues, pushing its leadership to reject stricter gun control policies they previously supported).
\textsuperscript{109} Kopel, \textit{supra} note 45, at 1545.
\textsuperscript{110} Vizzard, \textit{Gun Control Act}, supra note 94, at 87.
\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Id.} at 87-88 (describing changes enacted in the GCA); Gun Control Act of 1968, Pub. L. No. 90-618, sec. 102, \textsection 924(c), 82 Stat. 1273, 1224 (imposing increased penalties for gun use in a crime) (codified as amended at 18 U.S.C. \textsection 924(c)).
\textsuperscript{112} 18 U.S.C. \textsection 924(b) (1968).
\textsuperscript{113} 18 U.S.C. \textsection 924(c) (1968).
\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Id.}
We pause here to underscore the importance of § 924(c) because of its increasing relevance in federal criminal enforcement. In 2016, for example, about one in every thirty-three offenders sentenced for violating federal law was sentenced under this provision.\(^{116}\) Congress here created, in the Supreme Court's words, a "combination crime . . . [that] punishes the temporal and relational conjunction of two separate acts, on the ground that together they pose an extreme risk of harm."\(^{117}\) It punishes the combination of using or carrying a gun and committing a separate federal crime. Surprisingly, though, this new offense was not a central component of the legislation. The provision was not part of the original House bill but was instead proposed as an amendment on the House floor and swiftly passed.\(^{118}\) "Because the provision was passed on the same day it was introduced on the House floor, it is the subject of no legislative hearings or committee reports."\(^{119}\)

And because of the provision's increasing centrality in firearms prosecutions, Congress has frequently revised the statute, often to expand it and add increasingly severe mandatory minimum sentences where there were once relatively minor ones. Indeed, in the span of just 14 years, "[b]etween 1984 and 1998, Congress expanded the reach or increased the severity of § 924(c) on four occasions."\(^{120}\) We detail some of the major changes.

First, Congress amended the statute in 1971, just three years after the GCA's passage, to mandate that "the term of imprisonment imposed under this subsection" shall not "run concurrently with any term of imprisonment imposed for the commission of such felony" that generated the charge.\(^{121}\)

Next, in 1984, concurrently with the Sentencing Reform Act, Congress limited the enhancement to using or carrying a firearm during or in relation to a "crime of violence," but changed the applicable sentences to a flat

\(^{116}\) For the complete text and changes to the statute over time, see the Appendix. See also U.S. Sent’g Comm’n, Mandatory Minimum Penalties for Federal Firearms Offenses in the Federal Criminal Justice System 19 (2018) (providing that 1,976 offenders were convicted of at least one offense under § 924(c) in 2016, which represented 2.9% of federal offenders sentenced that year), https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-and-publications/research-publications/2018/20180116_Firearms-Mand-Min.pdf [https://perma.cc/G9BH-P8KV].


\(^{118}\) Simpson v. United States, 435 U.S. 6, 13 (1978) (describing the legislative history of § 924(c)).

\(^{119}\) Id. at 13 n.7.

\(^{120}\) Abbott v. United States, 562 U.S. 8, 23 (2010).

\(^{121}\) Omnibus Crime Control Act of 1970, Pub. L. No. 91-644, sec. 13, § 924(c), 84 Stat. 1886, 1889-90 (1971) (codified as amended at 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)). The Act did lower the mandatory minimum for second or subsequent offenses from five years to two years, but, in combination with mandatory consecutive sentencing, it is not clear this made the statute more lenient.
mandatory five-year term for first offenders and a ten-year term for a second or subsequent conviction.\textsuperscript{122}

Two years later, as part of the Firearm Owners’ Protection Act (“FOPA”), which we discuss in more detail below, Congress again expanded the enhancement. It added drug-trafficking crimes to crimes of violence as predicate offenses and added a ten-year flat sentence for cases involving machine guns or silencers (and twenty years for a second or subsequent offense).\textsuperscript{123} FOPA also added a definition for both types of predicate offenses, definitions that would serve to generate significant litigation in the years to come.\textsuperscript{124}

In 1998, Congress divided § 924(c)(1) from a single paragraph into a set of four detailed subsections, more carefully delineating the sentencing options, and with mandatory minimum sentences in place of the prior flat sentence depending on whether and how the firearm was used.\textsuperscript{125} At the same time, Congress also amended § 924(c) to outlaw not only “use” in relation to a predicate offense, but also the possession of a firearm “in furtherance” of a predicate drug-trafficking or violent offense.\textsuperscript{126}

Finally, in 2018, as part of the First Step Act, Congress made its first change to make the statute more lenient. In response to \textit{Deal v. United States},\textsuperscript{127} which held that a “second or subsequent conviction” could be one that came in the same proceeding as the first conviction, Congress revised the provision to clarify that the recidivist enhancement is only available after a prior conviction has become final.\textsuperscript{128}

The Gun Control Act of 1968 remains to this day the governing framework for federal firearms laws. But at the time of its enactment, neither side was completely happy with the law; advocates for tighter regulation bemoaned the NRA’s success in eliminating stricter requirements, while gun-rights activists claimed the NRA failed them in allowing a gun bill to pass at

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{123} Firearms Owners’ Protection Act, Pub. L. No. 99-308, sec. 104(a)(2), § 924(c), 100 Stat. 449, 456-57 (1986) (codified as amended at 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)).
  \item \textsuperscript{124} FOPA provided a “crime of violence” is a felony that either (i) “has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against the person or property of another,” or is a crime that (ii) “by its nature, involves a substantial risk that physical force against the person or property of another may be used in the course of committing the offense.” \textit{Id.} § 104(a).
  \item \textsuperscript{125} United States v. O’Brien, 560 U.S. 218, 232-33 (2010) (discussing these substantive changes, which played a role in the Court’s ruling).
  \item \textsuperscript{126} An Act to Throttle Criminal Use of Guns, Pub. L. No. 105-386, sec. 1, § 924(c), 112 Stat. 3469, 3469 (1998) (codified as amended at 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)).
  \item \textsuperscript{127} 508 U.S. 129, 132-33, 137 (1993).
  \item \textsuperscript{128} First Step Act of 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-391, sec. 403(a), § 924(c)(1)(C), 132 Stat. 5394, 5221-22 (codified as amended at 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)(1)(C)).
\end{itemize}
all. Treasury again was tasked with enforcement of the Act. As with the NFA and FFA, enforcement was delegated to the IRS’s Alcohol and Tax Division, which just a few years after the law “achieved full bureau status as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.”

Like its predecessor gun crime statutes, the 1968 legislation—both the omnibus bill and the GCA (which are generally collectively referred to as the GCA)—generated controversy that reached the Supreme Court. Indeed, the Court has, over the past three decades, ruled on just § 924(c) so many times that in United States v. O’Brien, ruling that the use of a machine gun was a sentencing-enhancer that must be proven to the jury, the Court wearily commented, “[t]he Court must interpret, once again, § 924(c) of Title 18 of the United States Code.” We return to § 924(c) when we draw implications in Parts II and III.


Faced with increasing crime rates, Congress sought further ways to deter and punish lawbreakers. One way it did so was “to target career criminals for punishment in light of social scientific research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s concluding that a relatively small number of habitual offenders are responsible for a large fraction of crimes.” The Armed Career Criminal Act (“ACCA”) was, in the words of James Jacobs, partly the result of the “law-and-order politics [that] had become firmly entrenched” by the 1980s.

In 1981, Senator Arlen Specter introduced a bill that would eventually become the ACCA. That bill—the Career Criminal Life Sentence Act of 1981—created a new mandatory life sentence for certain crimes. Its main provision read:

---

129 Deconde, supra note 34, at 186-88.
130 Hardy, supra note 40, at 604.
131 Id. at 595.
132 See Kopel, supra note 45, at 1548-49 (“Because the Federal GCA vastly expanded the scope of federal gun laws, the federal courts were soon hearing plenty of cases about ‘prohibited persons’ (usually, convicted felons) who had violated federal law by possessing a firearm.”).
133 560 U.S. 218, 221 (2010).
134 See Beale, supra note 44, at 43 (“The 1980s and 1990s brought increased public concern with violent crime, and Congress responded with the enactment of a number of new federal offenses . . . .”).
136 Jacobs, supra note 63, at 26.
137 Levine, supra note 135, at 545.
Whoever commits, conspires, or attempts to commit a robbery or a burglary in violation of the felony statutes of a State or of the United States while using, threatening to use, displaying or possessing a firearm, after having been twice convicted of a robbery or a burglary in violation of the felony statutes of a State or the United States is a career criminal and upon conviction shall be sentenced to imprisonment for life.139

Specter’s bill would have vastly expanded the reach of federal criminal law. After criticism about federalizing robbery and burglary crimes, the proponents of harsher punishment turned to a preexisting jurisdictional hook—the federal gun crimes.140 The new version “eliminated the creation of federal jurisdiction over local robberies and burglaries committed by repeat offenders” and instead “created a sentence enhancement for repeat offenders convicted of violating a preexisting federal law.”141 As signed into law, the ACCA amended Title VII of the 1968 legislation.142 It provided that any person caught unlawfully possessing firearms (e.g., felons) after three prior robbery or burglary convictions faced a mandatory minimum sentence of 15 years in prison.143 The ACCA took away any judicial discretion, providing:

[T]he court shall not suspend the sentence of, or grant a probationary sentence to, such person with respect to the conviction under this subsection, and such person shall not be eligible for parole with respect to the sentence imposed under this subsection.144

The ACCA was amended two years later in 1986 to substantially expand its reach.145 Those amendments replaced the qualifying predicate offenses; instead of robbery or burglary, the predicates became “a violent felony or a serious drug offense.”146 The statute defined a “violent felony” to include felonies that (1) had force as an element, (2) were one of several enumerated crimes— (“burglary, arson, or extortion”) or ones involving explosives, or that (3) “otherwise involve[] conduct that presents a serious potential risk of physical injury to another.”147 The last clause became known as the “residual

---

139 Id. § 2118(a).
140 Levine, supra note 135, at 546-47.
141 Id.
143 Id. § 1802.
144 Id.
147 Id. at 3207-40.
clause.”148 With these amendments, Congress covered both “crimes against the person” and “certain physically risky crimes against property.”149

As one scholar has noted, these provisions were quite popular: “[h]eaping punishment on those who supplied firearms to violent criminals and drug traffickers appealed to everyone.”150 The Supreme Court has noted the focus on recidivism and firearms, observing that “throughout the history of the enhancement provision, Congress focused its efforts on career offenders—those who commit a large number of fairly serious crimes as their means of livelihood, and who, because they possess weapons, present at least a potential threat of harm to persons.”151

The ACCA has generated a long line of Supreme Court cases considering how to deal with the predicate felonies. In Taylor v. United States, the Court concluded that whether a prior conviction counts as an enumerated predicate (there, as “burglary”) should be determined based on comparing the elements of the underlying conviction to the “generic” offense.152 The Court in Descamps v. United States declared that Congress did not want courts looking to the underlying facts; instead, it “meant ACCA to function as an on-off switch, directing that a prior crime would qualify as a predicate offense in all cases or in none.”153

When it came to ACCA’s residual clause, the Court’s inability to draw clear lines throughout a series of cases led it to eventually scrap the enterprise.154 In Johnson v. United States, the Court struck down the residual

---

150 JACOBS, supra note 63, at 29.
152 Id. at 600. Treatment of the burglary offense has alone prompted several cases. See, e.g., Quarles v. United States, 139 S. Ct. 1872, 1879 (2019) (holding that for generic burglary, “remaining-in-burglary . . . occur[s] when the defendant forms the intent to commit a crime at any time while unlawfully present in a building or structure”); United States v. Stitt, 139 S. Ct. 399, 407 (2018) (holding that generic burglary includes burglary of a structure or vehicle that has been adapted or is customarily used for overnight accommodation). But courts cannot rely on police reports to establish a connection to the generic offense. See Shepard v. United States, 544 U.S. 13, 26 (2005) (holding that the sentencing court making the determination “is limited to the terms of the charging document, the terms of a plea agreement or transcript of colloquy between judge and defendant in which the factual basis for the plea was confirmed by the defendant, or to some comparable judicial record of this information”).
154 Justice Scalia plainly stated in Derby the Court’s inability to draw clear lines, commenting:

Since our ACCA cases are incomprehensible to judges, the statute obviously does not give ‘person[s] of ordinary intelligence fair notice’ of its reach. I would grant certiorari, declare ACCA’s residual provision to be unconstitutionally vague, and ring down the curtain on the ACCA farce playing in federal courts throughout the Nation.
clause as unconstitutionally vague.\textsuperscript{155} As it said, “this Court’s repeated attempts and repeated failures to craft a principled and objective standard out of the residual clause confirm its hopeless indeterminacy.”\textsuperscript{156}


As part of the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984, Congress not only enacted the ACCA, but also empowered the newly created U.S. Sentencing Commission to develop sentencing guidelines.\textsuperscript{157} The Sentencing Reform Act “was passed at a time of soaring crime rates, and during a period when crime had increasingly become a national political issue.”\textsuperscript{158} The push for determinate sentencing guidelines was supported by “both sides of the political aisle.”\textsuperscript{159}

The main gun-related guideline the Commission drafted, and amended in certain respects since, is U.S.S.G. \textsuperscript{\textsection}2K2.1.\textsuperscript{160} As with other guidelines, it accounts for elements and definitions in key statutes but also seeks consideration of “real offense” aspects of cases that commonly arise across different charges.\textsuperscript{161}

In general, \textsuperscript{\textsection}2K2.4 states that unless a person is a career offender, the sentence for a violation of \textsuperscript{\textsection}924(c) will be the mandatory minimum, with other offense-level adjustments not applicable.\textsuperscript{162} The offense level may depend on the type of firearm; the number of them; the defendant’s prior convictions for firearms, ammunition, drug or violent felonies; whether the person was prohibited from possession as a convict or a noncitizen without status; or whether the use or possession was in connection with another offense.\textsuperscript{163} For example, the guidelines address sentencing enhancement for

---


\textsuperscript{156} Id. at 598.


\textsuperscript{159} Id.

\textsuperscript{160} See also U.S. \textit{Sent’g Comm’n, Primer on Firearms Offenses} 22-38 (2021) (summarizing offense levels based on presence of certain characteristics).

\textsuperscript{161} See generally Stephen Breyer, \textit{The Federal Sentencing Guidelines and the Key Compromises upon Which They Rest}, 17 \textit{Hofstra L. Rev.} 1, 11-12 (1988) (explaining that the Commission’s approach combines the “base offense level” with “real” aggravating or mitigating factors).

\textsuperscript{162} U.S. Sent’g Guidelines Manual \textsection 2K2.4(b), (c) (U.S. Sent’g Comm’n 2018).

\textsuperscript{163} Id. at \textsection 2K2.1. Additional, more specialized guidelines deal with “Use of Firearm, Armor-Piercing Ammunition, or Explosive During or in Relation to Certain Crimes.” Id. at \textsection 2K2.4. There are also specialized guidelines for "Possession of Firearm or Dangerous Weapon in Federal Facility; Possession or Discharge of Firearm in School Zone" and "Possessing, Purchasing, or Owning Body Armor by Violent Felons." Id. at \textsection 2K2.5-6.
felony possession of multiple firearms, increasing the base level of offenses if a person illegally possesses three or more firearms, with the enhancement increasing with the number of firearms involved.\textsuperscript{164} The guidelines also create enhancements if a defendant trafficked in firearms.\textsuperscript{165} The Sentencing Guidelines are advisory following the Supreme Court’s ruling in \textit{United States v. Booker} in 2005, but they are still highly relevant in plea bargain negotiations and at sentencing.\textsuperscript{166} Substantial case law has interpreted provisions in these guidelines.\textsuperscript{167}


The Gun Control Act generated controversy among gun-rights proponents almost from the beginning.\textsuperscript{168} It led to calls to rein in enforcement efforts, fix confusion in the law, and protect law-abiding citizens from becoming “technical” law-breakers.\textsuperscript{169} An increasingly hardline NRA and its congressional and grassroots supporters highlighted serious concerns about aggressive enforcement actions conducted by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (“ATF”).\textsuperscript{170} ATF’s enforcement “generated intense reaction from a small but vocal minority of licensed dealers and unlicensed traffickers, long used to unrestricted trafficking in guns.”\textsuperscript{171}

\textsuperscript{164} Id. \S 2K2.1(b)(1); see also id. at app. 5 (clarifying that lawfully obtained or possessed firearms do not count towards an enhancement).

\textsuperscript{165} Id. \S 2K2.1(b)(5).


\textsuperscript{168} See \textit{Spitzer}, supra note 39, at 191 (observing that “[g]un control opponents nevertheless immediately set to work to erode the [GCA], if not overturn it entirely”). Indeed, President Ford called for its repeal as part of his 1976 presidential campaign. \textit{DeConde}, supra note 34, at 204.

\textsuperscript{169} See \textit{Hardy}, supra note 40, at 606-07 (“Beginning in early 1979, Senate hearings publicized a number of cases of serious abuses of enforcement powers. This documentation was later cited as the empirical foundation of FOPA.”). These abuses included charging a disabled Vietnam veteran with possession of an unregistered machine gun despite the lack of any proof that he knew the characteristics that made the weapon a regulated one, resulting in an apology from the judge, who directed the verdict for the veteran. \textit{Oversight Hearings on Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms: Hearing of the Comm. on Appropriations}, 96th Cong. 20-30 (1979) (recording testimony of David A. Moorhead). The Congressional Record included the trial transcript of the federal district judge dismissing the indictments after trial and castigating the government for overzealous enforcement: “I don’t think this case should have been brought . . . [O]n behalf of the law enforcement officials in this case, they should have used some common sense and a little compassion and taken all the facts into consideration.” Id. at 27.

\textsuperscript{170} See \textit{Kopel}, supra note 45, at 1566 (describing FOPA as “conceived in the late 1970s and early 1980s as congressional committees recorded horror stories of abusive BATF prosecutions.”).

\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Vizzard}, \textit{Impact}, supra note 36, at 342.
FOPA made a number of significant modifications to the existing firearms law tapestry. It systemized treatment of prohibited possessors under § 922, combining and revising the poorly-structured and inconsistent provisions in the 1968 legislation.172 It also added a more robust relief from firearm disabilities process.173 The GCA had prohibited possession for those with state convictions, even when state law restored one’s civil rights.174 FOPA changed that175 and expanded the ability of all prohibited possessors to seek from the Treasury Secretary (and later ATF) relief from that disability.176

FOPA also repealed some of the GCA’s interstate sales provisions, allowing dealers to sell rifles and shotguns to an out-of-state resident as long as the sale is legal in both the seller and buyer’s states.177 In one of its few more restrictive measures, FOPA banned private possession of machine guns manufactured after 1986.178

Another major set of revisions in FOPA relate to dealers. Indeed, FOPA might accurately be described as the Firearm Dealers Protection Act.179 The NRA, other pro-gun interest groups, and gun-friendly legislators ensured

---

172 See Hardy, supra note 40, at 639 (“Few portions of the Gun Control Act were as garbled as its core, the definition of ‘prohibited persons’ who were forbidden to acquire, possess or transport firearms.”).
173 See id. at 644 (“FOPA, while retaining review on an ‘arbitrary and capricious’ standard uniquely expanded district court review by allowing the court to admit evidence outside the record . . . .”).
174 See United States v. Ziegenhagen, 420 F. Supp. 72, 74-75 (E.D. Wis. 1976) (holding that the possession ban applied and stating “[t]he purpose of the statutes . . . would be emasculated if every person receiving a restoration of civil rights after completing a state sentence were deemed not to have been convicted within the meaning of these federal laws.”).
175 Firearms Owners’ Protection Act, Pub. L. No. 99-308, sec. 101, § 921(a)(20)(B), 100 Stat. 449, 450 (1986) (codified as amended at 18 U.S.C. § 921) (“What constitutes a conviction of such a crime shall be determined in accordance with the law of the jurisdiction in which the proceedings were held.”).
176 See id. sec. 105, § 922(e), 100 Stat. at 459 (amending Section 922 of the code “by inserting ‘Any person whose application for relief from disabilities is denied by the Secretary may file a petition with the United States district court . . . for a judicial review of such denial.’”); see also Pannal Alan Sanders, United States v. Bean: Shootin’ After the Elephant?, 35 S. MARY’L J. 555, 564-65 (2004) (explaining that the amendment removed the limitations that made only certain felons eligible); United States v. Bean, 537 U.S. 71, 74 (2002) (noting that the Treasury Secretary delegated to ATF the authority to act on applications).
177 See Firearms Owners’ Protection Act, Pub. L. No. 99-308, sec. 102, § 922(b)(A), 100 Stat. 449, 451 (amending Section 922 of title 18 to make it inapplicable to these sales).
178 Id. sec. 102, § 922(o)(1), (2), 100 Stat. at 453 (codified at 18 U.S.C. § 922(o)). This addition to the bill “was raised with only minutes left in the time allotted [for floor debate] under the rule” and was “passed on a rather irregular voice vote.” Hardy, supra note 40, at 625.
179 See Vizzard, Current and Future Policy, supra note 34, at 882-83 (explaining that “[a]mong the most significant changes” FOPA made to the existing federal framework were a series of changes affecting dealers); Anthony A. Braga, More Gun Laws or More Gun Law Enforcement?, 20 J. POL’Y ANALYSIS & MGMT. 545, 547 (2001) (explaining that FOPA, combined with NRA influence, makes dealer prosecutions more difficult).
that FOPA would make enforcement against dealers more difficult.\textsuperscript{180} A number of FOPA’s provisions reflect this difficulty.

The Act provided a definition of “engaged in the business” of firearm sales, manufacturing, and repairs that made lots of occasional sellers no longer covered by the requirement to obtain a license. Only those “who devote[] time, attention, and labor to dealing in firearms as a regular course of trade or business with the principal objective of livelihood and profit through the repetitive purchase and resale of firearms” had to be licensed as dealers.\textsuperscript{181}

Other provisions had similar deregulatory effect, including (1) curtailing ATF’s rulemaking authority because of concerns over how it had been used with respect to dealers,\textsuperscript{182} (2) raising the scienter requirement for dealer violations,\textsuperscript{183} (3) restricting ATF’s ability to police dealers,\textsuperscript{184} and (4) limiting ATF’s authority to acquire licensee records.\textsuperscript{185} In short, as historian Alexander DeConde put it, “the act gutted the already feeble federal firearms regulation.”\textsuperscript{186}

FOPA also modified the firearm sentence enhancements. In addition to Title VII of the 1968 legislation, FOPA recodified ACCA into 18 U.S.C. § 924(e), bringing most major firearm crimes into one chapter of the U.S. Code.\textsuperscript{187} Substantively, FOPA slightly changed ACCA’s definition of burglary and expanded § 924(c)’s sentence enhancement.\textsuperscript{188} It provided extra enhancements for the use of machine guns or silencers.\textsuperscript{189}

\textsuperscript{180} See SPITZER, supra note 39, at 191 (noting that the NRA was “joined by the Gun Owners of America and the Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms” in lobbying for FOPA’s changes).


\textsuperscript{182} See Hardy, supra note 40, at 618-20 (explaining that the final version of the bill limited the record-submission power that provided the Treasury with the rulemaking power to make regulations).

\textsuperscript{183} Hardy describes the increase in the scienter requirement for dealer violations, stating:

After negotiations in which Treasury argued that it ought not to be required to prove intent to violate the law for serious offenses such as possession of stolen weapons, felon in possession and illegal importation, a bifurcation was drafted under which these offenses needed proof only of a ‘knowing’ violation, while the remainder still required proof of willfulness.

\textsuperscript{Id. at 647-48}

\textsuperscript{184} See id. at 617-18 (“The NRA’s core concern had been to prevent the use of inspections to harass dealers or to drum up technical cases by ‘fishing expeditions.’”).


\textsuperscript{186} DECONDE, supra note 34, at 230.


\textsuperscript{188} Taylor v. United States, 495 U.S. 575, 582 (1990) (“The definition of burglary was amended slightly, by replacing the words ‘any felony’ with ‘any crime punishable by a term of imprisonment exceeding one year and . . . .’”).

\textsuperscript{189} Firearms Owners’ Protection Act, sec. 104(a)(2)(D), (E), § 924(c), 100 Stat. at 456-57.
In sum, “FOPA's impact on enforcement and administration of the federal firearms laws is wide-ranging.” But those impacts are uneven. Dealers and potential dealers get a break; offenders or potential offenders get another book thrown at them. Thus, while FOPA "generally tightens standards for record inspection and disposition, firearm seizures and forfeitures, license revocations and general criminal penalties," it simultaneously “expand[s] mandatory sentencing for use of firearms in” certain offenses.

C. Toward Modern Regulatory Approaches

On January 17, 1989, a 24-year old white supremacist killed five students and one teacher at an elementary school in Stockton, California and injured 33 more. The shooter, who had a criminal record, used an AK-47 in the attack. One historian has observed how the Stockton shooting "denoted a marked change in the public reaction to civilian gun violence." This tragic event helped pave the way for the next major set of gun regulations, which focused on the offender and his weapons.

1. The Brady Act (1993)

During John Hinckley’s assassination attempt on President Reagan in 1981, Hinckley gravely injured Reagan’s press secretary James Brady. Following this incident, James and his wife Sarah became active supporters of more stringent regulation of firearms. To that end, Sarah Brady became involved with one of the largest pro-regulation organizations, Handgun Control Inc.; she was elected to the Board in 1985 and took over as Chair in 1989, where she "stimulated fund-raising, kept the organization focused on what she saw as the need for more effective federal gun regulation, and initiated fresh, aggressive tactics against the gun lobby."

190 Id. at 653-54.
191 Id.
192 DECONDE, supra note 34, at 237.
193 Id.
194 Id.
195 See Kopel, supra note 45, at 1574-75 (“Brady threw herself into the movement that her husband would later join as well. Eventually, the organization would bear her name . . . . As Republican insiders, the Bradys offered the possibility of taking the gun control message to the Republican establishment.”).
197 DECONDE, supra note 34, at 241.
One major focus became a push for a waiting period on handgun purchases.\footnote{See James B. Jacobs & Kimberly A. Potter, Keeping Guns Out of the "Wrong" Hands: The Brady Law and the Limits of Regulation, 86 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 93, 97 (1995) ("Gun control advocates proposed a waiting period and a background check . . ."); see also SPITZER, supra note 39, at 202 ("From 1987 to 1993, gun control proponents placed their primary emphasis on the enactment of a national waiting period for handgun purchases.").} The legislation's goal was twofold: first, it sought to allow time for a background check to assess whether the prospective purchaser was prohibited from possessing firearms, and second, it looked to create a cooling off period.\footnote{See SPITZER, supra note 39, at 202 (explaining these twin aims).} The first version of the Brady bill was introduced in 1987, but it failed to pass the House.\footnote{See id. ("The Brady bill was introduced in early 1987 . . . [But] opponents led by the NRA succeeded in defeating the bill . . .").} That did not stop the effort, and the legislation was reintroduced again in the early 1990s. Although the Brady bill did not receive a welcome audience in the George H.W. Bush administration,\footnote{DECONDE, supra note 34, at 242 (noting that President Bush stood firm on the gun issue and threatened to veto the bill).} it did pick up other major backers. “[T]he Bradys had persuaded former presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter to endorse the gun-control bill,” and “[e]ven Reagan . . . broke with the gun lobby’s position on this issue” and announced his support.\footnote{Id. at 203; see also Marc Christopher Cozzolino, Gun Control: The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, 16 SETON HALL LEGIS. J. 245, 256-57 (1992) (chronicling the practical objections to the alternative option, including time and cost constraints).} As Reagan said in a \textit{New York Times} op-ed, “[b]ased upon the evidence in states that already have handgun purchase waiting periods, this bill—on a nationwide scale—can’t help but stop thousands of illegal handgun purchases.”\footnote{Id. at 203; see also Marc Christopher Cozzolino, Gun Control: The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, 16 SETON HALL LEGIS. J. 245, 256-57 (1992) (chronicling the practical objections to the alternative option, including time and cost constraints).} Aided by this cadre of supporters, the bill started to move in Congress.

The House passed the bill in 1991 over a competing alternative, backed by the NRA, that would have eliminated the waiting period and instead instituted an instant background check.\footnote{Ronald Reagan, \textit{Why I’m for the Brady Bill}, \textit{N.Y. Times}, Mar. 29, 1991, at A23.} “The problem with such a proposal at the time was that successful operation of such a system required that pertinent records from all the states be fully automated.”\footnote{See SPITZER, supra note 39, at 203 (explaining that the NRA bill would have eliminated one of the Brady bill’s aims of creating a cooling-off period but still barred ineligible buyers from purchasing handguns).} That was far from a reality. In the Senate, the bill was modified and attached to an omnibus crime bill that had divided the chambers throughout the year.\footnote{Id. at 203; see also Marc Christopher Cozzolino, Gun Control: The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, 16 SETON HALL LEGIS. J. 245, 256-57 (1992) (chronicling the practical objections to the alternative option, including time and cost constraints).} A conference committee tried to hash out a compromise between the House and Senate
versions, but, though that compromise received House support, the resulting bill was filibusted in the Senate.207

The Brady bill would come back again after the 1992 election. During that election, the NRA refused to support Bush for reelection even though Clinton ran on a platform that embraced stricter gun regulation, including support for the Brady bill.208 On the campaign trail and in office, Clinton talked about firearms like other politicians; “[h]e persisted in identifying the gun problem primarily with crime.”209 Once in office, Clinton used his popularity to push for these new laws. And his allies in Congress were happy to oblige, introducing the Brady bill again less than a month after Clinton assumed office.210

The bill retained a five-business-day waiting period for handgun purchases, but the House agreed to an amendment to eliminate the waiting period after five years.211 In the Senate, however, the prospect of another filibuster loomed.212 But, “sensing a rising tide of impatience and the inability to win further concessions from Democratic leaders,” Republican legislators backed down and the measure passed the Senate.213 President Clinton signed it into law on November 30, 1993, after “[t]he NRA put up a token effort to stop it, but focused primarily on influencing the final law through amendments,”214 “Ultimately, after seven years of struggle, intensive lobbying by organizations such as Handgun Control Inc., and mounting resentment against the tactics of the gun lobby, control proponents cracked the opposition to the Brady bill.”215

The law modified several aspects of prior firearms legislation, including most prominently imposing the temporary waiting period.216 It also required dealers to verify a buyer’s identity and transmit the buyer’s information to

---

207 See id. (“The Senate finally brought the compromise bill to the floor for a vote . . . , but Republicans used the unique Senate device of the filibuster . . . to force bill sponsors to withdraw the measure after a vote to end debate . . . .”).

208 See DECONDE, supra note 34, at 245–46 (“Still incensed by [Bush’s] stance on assault guns, the rifle association refused to contribute to his campaign or to endorse him again. It took this position even though . . . Clinton . . . posed a greater danger to the association’s doctrines.”).

209 See id. at 250.

210 Id. at 249.

211 See SPITZER, supra note 39, at 204 (“The Brady bill struggle climaxed in 1993 when supporters promoted a five-business-day waiting period . . . . One such amendment, to phase out the waiting period after five years, was adopted.”).

212 Id. at 204 (“The bill faced a Republican filibuster almost immediately . . . .”).

213 Id. at 205; see also Adam Clymer, How Jockeying Brought Brady Bill Back to Life, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 22, 1993, at B8 (describing the negotiations that led to the passage of the Brady bill).

214 Kopel, supra note 45, at 1582.

215 DECONDE, supra note 34, at 250–51.

the chief law enforcement officer (“CLEO”) of the jurisdiction. CLEOs were then required to make a “reasonable effort” to determine in five days whether the transfer would violate the law. In Printz v. United States, the Supreme Court struck down these temporary Brady provisions as an unconstitutional commandeering of state executive power.

In its most lasting legacy, the law required the Attorney General to establish a national instant background-check system within the five years during which the temporary waiting period was in effect. Pursuant to that directive, and under delegation from the Attorney General, the FBI launched the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (“NICS”) in late 1998 to conduct automated background checks on all firearms sales—not just handgun sales—by licensed gun dealers. By 1999, the Department of Justice called NICS “highly effective in stopping the illegal flow of firearms from federally licensed gun dealers to prohibited persons.” During its first twenty-four months of operation, “the system processed over seventeen million inquiries and prevented over 300,000 felons, fugitives, and other prohibited persons from receiving firearms from federally licensed dealers.”


The same pro-regulation forces that passed the Brady bill continued to push for more stringent regulations. The 1994 crime bill was a result of this effort. The bill, formally known as the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, reflects an increasing agreement on tough-on-

---

217 Id.

218 Id. at 1537-38. There was not much clarity, however, on what this requirement obligated CLEOs to do. See Jacobs & Potter, supra note 198, at 99 (“On its face, this law could mean an effort as cursory as checking local criminal records or as comprehensive as making inquiries of federal, state, local, and private institutions and agencies responsible for dealing with crime, mental health, immigration, and drugs.”).

219 The Court in Printz describing the practice and holding it unconstitutional stated:

[T]he central obligation imposed upon CLEOs by the interim provisions of the Brady Act—the obligation to make a reasonable effort to ascertain within 5 business days whether receipt or possession [of a handgun] would be in violation of the law, including research in whatever State and local recordkeeping systems are available and in a national system designated by the Attorney General,’ . . . is unconstitutional.


220 See Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, supra note 216, at 1541 (“Not later than 60 months after the date of the enactment of this Act, the Attorney General shall establish a national instant criminal background check system . . . .”).


222 Id.
crime politics. As one scholar noted at the time, the liberal-conservative divide that marked differing approaches to crime in the 1960s (root cause focus vs. harsh punishment) had “largely disappeared” by the 1990s. By then, “measures emphasizing punishment far overshadow[ed] any consideration of crime prevention” and “[b]oth conservatives and liberals attempt[ed] to outdo each other in their posturing and proposals to be increasingly punitive toward criminals.”

The Senate passed its version of the crime bill in November 1993, around the same time the Brady bill passed the Senate. It took the House until April 1994 to pass its own crime bill, and the resulting legislation that emerged from conference committee passed both chambers in August 1994. Clinton signed it into law the next month.

Title XI of the Act included a host of new gun regulations. First, it contained the Public Safety and Recreational Firearm Use Protection Act, also known as the assault weapons ban. The law banned specific firearms by name, gave the ATF authority to ban other models, and banned semi-automatic rifles with at least two enumerated features. It also banned magazines that could hold more than ten rounds. But the Act grandfathered in all then-legally owned weapons and magazines. “Not surprisingly, there was a huge increase in sales in the year before the ban became effective.”

The ban contained a sunset clause, repealing the provisions ten years after its effective date. Congress did not renew the ban in 2004.

Second, Title XI also contained the Youth Handgun Safety Act. The provision prohibits the possession of handguns or handgun ammunition by anyone under age 18. Any juvenile violating the provision or person knowingly providing a handgun to a juvenile faced up to a year of imprisonment. But the Act provided criminal sanctions of up to ten years

---

224 Tony G. Poveda, Clinton, Crime, and the Justice Department, 21 SOC. JUST. 73, 73 (1994).
225 Id.
226 Id. at 73-74.
227 Id.
228 See Kopel, supra note 45, at 1585.
230 JACOBS, supra note 63, at 31.
231 Id. at 32.
232 Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act § 110105.
234 Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act § 110201.
235 Id.
236 Id.
in prison for anyone providing the juvenile a gun “knowing or having reasonable cause to know that the juvenile intended to carry or otherwise possess or discharge or otherwise use the handgun or ammunition in the commission of a crime of violence.”

Third, the law created a new category of prohibited persons. It prohibited individuals subject to an order that restrained them from “harassing, stalking, or threatening” an intimate partner or child of their intimate partner from possessing guns if the order met specific requirements. As David Kopel notes, this “was a measure that the NRA had not resisted.”

The law also created several firearm-related sentence enhancements. It directed the Sentencing Commission “to provide an appropriate enhancement of the punishment” if a crime of violence or drug-trafficking crime was committed with any semi-automatic firearm (not just a semi-automatic banned as an assault weapon). It did the same for anyone convicted of a counterfeiting or forgery crime if the defendant “used or carried a firearm . . . during and in relation to the felony.” It also required an enhancement for anyone convicted under 922(g) if the person had a prior violent felony or serious drug-offense conviction.

The law was also notable for what it did not include. Senator Alfonse D’Amato introduced a provision that would make it a federal crime to engage in any crime using a handgun that had travelled in interstate commerce, potentially covering 900,000 offenses annually, which engendered noteworthy opposition from the Chief Justice and the Judicial Conference of the United States, as Sara Sun Beale has described. The amendment was passed by both the House and the Senate, but was omitted in conference. Chief Justice William Rehnquist repeatedly spoke out against the amendment as “inconsistent with long-accepted concepts of federalism” and as an approach that would have “overburdened” federal courts and “swamped” prosecutors.

---

237 Id.
238 Id. at § 110,401.
239 The order had to be issued after a hearing in which the person had actual notice and an opportunity to participate. It also must have either contained a finding that the person was a threat to the intimate partner or child, or it expressly prohibited use or threats of force. Id.
240 Kopel, supra note 45, at 1586.
241 Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act § 110,501.
242 Id. at § 110,512.
243 Id. at § 110,513.
244 See Beale, supra note 35, at 1649-51 (detailing D’Amato’s proposal and criticisms of it).
245 Id. at 1650.
3. The NICS Improvement Amendments Act of 2007

The NICS Improvement Act of 2007 was designed to enhance the NICS system's access to state criminal records and records concerning persons prohibited from receiving firearms due to mental illness. It was primarily motivated by the April 16, 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, in which a student with a history of mental illness was able to purchase two firearms, with which he shot to death thirty-two students and faculty members, wounded seventeen more, and then took his own life. In the Act's findings section, Congress explained that this shooting "renewed the need to improve information-sharing that would enable Federal and State law enforcement agencies to conduct complete background checks on potential firearms purchasers." The Act incentivizes state sharing of information to the NICS by offering new grant programs for state executive and judicial agencies to improve information available to the NICS. It also provides for penalties for states that do not comply with the Act's record completeness goals.

Following initial opposition raising concerns about both gun rights and privacy rights, as well as the law's impact on veterans, lawmakers amended the statute—and ultimately, the NRA supported the Act. In June, when the Act passed the House, the NRA explained its support for using NICS to screen "those who have been adjudicated mentally incompetent." It also explained its support for the Act's removal of prohibitions of persons who have been relieved of adjudications of mental illness. The Act would help restore gun rights for veterans and others who were prohibited from purchasing firearms under the Brady Act. Finally, the legislation ensured there would be no tax or fee associated with obtaining a NICS check.

---

249 Id.
250 Id. at 2567, 2571.
251 Id. A state must also certify, to the satisfaction of the Attorney General, that the state has implemented a program permitting persons who have been adjudicated as having a mental defect or committed to a mental institution to obtain relief from the firearms disabilities as a result of such adjudication or commitment. Id. at § 101(c)(2)(A)(i).
253 'NICS Improvement Amendments Act' Not Gun Control, supra note 252.
254 Id.
255 Id.
256 Id.
The states have lagged considerably in updating records in the NICS system, 257 despite the potential grant program penalties for noncompliance. In 2011, Lindsey Lewis presented data that paints a stark picture of the lag in updated state records:

At the end of 2005, the NICS had over 234,000 records for people with disqualifying mental health histories. Yet in January 2006, there was an estimated 2.7 million people who had been involuntarily committed for mental health disorders. And as of April 2007, only 22 states contributed any mental health records to the NICS. . . . This means prohibited individuals are still able to buy guns without being caught by the NICS. 258

The federal government has not forcefully responded to this noncompliance—the penalties under the Act have never been enforced. 259

* * *

The vast array of federal firearm offenses, from the initial strict regulation of highly dangerous and unusual weapons to the increasingly punitive approach to use and possession offenses, display a number of significant features that we explore in the next two Parts.

II. FEDERAL ENFORCEMENT OF GUN OFFENSES

We described the evolution of a wide range of criminal gun offenses in Part I, including offenses designed to regulate manufacturing and distribution, limit possession, and require registration and tracking of firearms purchases. Yet federal enforcement has focused largely on three offenses: (1) § 922(g)(1) (felon possession); (2) § 924(c) (gun use during a crime); and (3) § 924(e) (ACCA). Moreover, as we describe in this Part, such enforcement has increased, as has sentence length, over the past four decades. This Part explores what accounts for the changing federal firearms prosecution dynamic by presenting data concerning federal firearms charging and sentencing, examining policy positions taken by federal enforcers, and describing the rise of the current task-force-based model for federal firearms enforcement.


259 See Alyssa Dale O’Donnell, Monsters, Myths, and Mental Illness: A Two-Step Approach to Reducing Gun Violence in the United States, 25 S. CAL. INTERDISC. L.J. 475, 500 (2016) (“[T]hese penalties have never been enforced. It is impossible to intimidate states into meeting compliance requirements if they know that realistically they will face no consequences for failure to do so.”).
A. Data on Federal Gun Prosecutions

We examine first the data from the Administrative Office of the Courts ("AOC") regarding federal gun prosecutions. The data we extract and present here represents the most comprehensive picture of how the federal government has treated gun crime since 1942, however it also has certain limitations due to changes in reporting over time.\footnote{Starting 1976, the AOC stated that changes in reporting required by the Speedy Trial Act made the data from that year onward “not directly comparable” to criminal statistics published in previous years. See ADMIN. OFF. OF THE U.S. CTS., ANNUAL REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES COURTS 77, 225-26 (1976) (describing the new district court criminal data collection system implemented in October 1975). In 2005, the AOC changed its offense classification system for reporting statistics, just regarding petty offenses, and thus cautions that pre- and post-2005 offense data are not comparable, since totals regarding petty offenses changed. ADMIN. OFF. OF THE U.S. CTS., 2005 JUDICIAL BUSINESS: ANNUAL REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR 23 (2005). The second change affected the inclusion of any petty offenses within the firearms category. Despite these two caveats, we think the complete picture demonstrates longer-term trends, which are also consistent with statements by enforcers, Sentencing Commission reporting, and analyses from other experts. See, e.g., EMILY TIRY, KELLY ROBERTS FREEMAN & WILLIAM ADAMS, URB. INST., PROSECUTION OF FEDERAL FIREARMS OFFENSES 2000-16 (2021), https://www.ojp.gov/pdfs/reports/254520.pdf [https://perma.cc/7BZD-FRSS] (describing trends in federal prosecutions of firearms offenses from 2000 to 2016); LAWRENCE A. GREENFELD & MARIANNE W. ZAWITZ, U.S. DEP’T JUST., WEAPONS OFFENSES AND OFFENDERS (1995) (detailing trends in state and federal weapons-related prosecutions from 1965 through 1993).} Analyzing these data does allow us to observe longer-term trends and draw certain conclusions about the coherence and cohesiveness of the federal government’s approach to firearms crimes, a theme we return to in Part III. We first present data on firearms charges and then place these trends in context. Figure 1 shows the number of cases commenced for federal gun crimes in absolute numbers and as a percentage of all federal criminal cases from 1942 to 2011. In 2012, the AOC stopped reporting case commencements by offense, and for that reason, Figure 2 reports the number of defendants charged with such crimes from 2012 to 2019.
As one would expect from the structure and enforcement mechanism of the early firearms acts, few prosecutions were brought for violation of these laws. Even though the laws prohibited possession without registration of

---

261 Source data on file with author.
262 Source data on file with author.
certain types of especially dangerous weapons, and all but forbid firearm possession for violent felons, the crimes were apparently not an important federal law enforcement priority.\textsuperscript{263}

With the GCA's enactment in 1968, things began to gradually change.\textsuperscript{264} Consider that more firearms charges were brought in just one year, 1975, than in the entire twenty-year period from 1945 to 1965.\textsuperscript{265} Even when enforcement picked up following the GCA, scholars estimate DOJ was declining to prosecute approximately 40\% of referrals from ATF, more than almost any other agency.\textsuperscript{266} Part of this may have been due to societal attitudes. As Robert Rabin notes, “in many types of cases prosecution may stir up either intense local sentiment against attaching a criminal label to the activity in question, or strong personal sympathy for the type of defendant caught in the meshes of the criminal system, making it extremely difficult to obtain a conviction.”\textsuperscript{267} This was almost certainly true for some violations of gun laws.

Prosecutions started to decline in the late 1970s, likely due in part to high-profile negative scrutiny of ATF enforcement actions,\textsuperscript{268} leading to a plateau during much of the Reagan administration. Beginning in the 1990s, prosecutions increased and continued in an upward, if not linear, progression. As Sara Sun Beale notes, as federal drug prosecutions increased by the early 1990s, “[f]irearms prosecutions also quadrupled, from 931 prosecutions in 1980 to 3,917 in 1992.”\textsuperscript{269} No doubt this reflects increased resource allocation to these efforts. ATF, though itself often under siege, “received a 299 percent increase in its budget and a 20 percent increase in the number of positions” from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s.\textsuperscript{270} During this same time period, the number of federal prosecutors nearly tripled.\textsuperscript{271}

By the late 1990s, federal enforcers innovated new methods to coordinate and enforce firearms statutes to reduce gun violence. Some were technological. The federal government began creating and investing in a new National Integrated Ballistics Information Network (NIBIN) designed to

\textsuperscript{263} See supra fig.1 (showing small numbers of prosecutions).
\textsuperscript{264} Vissaz, Gun Control Act, supra note 94, at 87-88.
\textsuperscript{265} See supra fig.1. During the twenty-year period from 1945-1965, federal prosecutors brought 2,981 firearms cases. In 1975 alone, they brought 3,165.
\textsuperscript{267} Id. at 1055.
\textsuperscript{268} See, e.g., Kopel, supra note 45, at 1566 (“FOPA . . . was conceived in the late 1970s and early 1980s as congressional committees recorded horror stories of abusive BATF prosecutions.”).
\textsuperscript{269} Sara Sun Beale, Too Many and Yet Too Few: New Principles to Define the Proper Limits for Federal Criminal Jurisdiction, 46 HASTINGS L.J. 979, 984 (1995); see also supra fig.1.
\textsuperscript{270} Beale, supra note 44, at 44.
\textsuperscript{271} Id. at 45 (noting an increase from approximately 3,000 to more than 8,000 prosecutors in U.S. Attorneys' Offices between the mid-1970s and 1990s).
create a national database of images from bullet and cartridge casings intended to better link spent ammunition recovered from crime scenes to firearms.\textsuperscript{272} By the late 1990s, new funds supported hiring additional ATF officers and federal investigators.\textsuperscript{273}

In the early 2000s, during the George W. Bush administration, federal weapons prosecutions initially rose, but then declined during the latter half of the Bush presidency. This trend of decreasing prosecution continued throughout the Obama Administration, before reversing during the Trump Administration.\textsuperscript{274} This is not necessarily the pattern one might expect, given the Bush and Trump Administrations’ support for gun rights and the Obama Administration’s support for gun regulations,\textsuperscript{275} but it may reflect attitudes towards aggressive use of federal criminal prosecutions for a variety of other non-firearm related goals.

Despite the welter of different firearms statutes described in Part I, what particularly stands out is that the most common charge, accounting for nearly two-thirds of cases, is the bread and butter felon-in-possession statute.\textsuperscript{276} Indeed, for the past decade, just two charges—922(g) (possession by prohibited persons) and 924(c) (furtherance of violent/drug trafficking crimes)—alone have accounted for more than 80% of all federal firearm

\begin{footnotesize}


\textsuperscript{276} Technically, the 18 U.S.C. § 922(g) category contains unlawful possession charges no matter the underlying reason for disqualification, but the overwhelming majority of unlawful possession charges are predicated on felony status. See U.S. SENT’G COMM’N, QUICK FACTS: FELON IN POSSESSION OF A FIREARM 1 (2021) (stating that felony conviction is the “most common[“] disqualification under 922(g)).
\end{footnotesize}
charges, as Figure 3 shows.\textsuperscript{277} The lead investigative agency for these prosecutions has been ATF.\textsuperscript{278}

\textbf{Figure 3: Percentage of Federal Gun Crime Defendants Commenced (2010–2021)\textsuperscript{279}}

Also noteworthy is the relative importance of firearms crimes in relation to other federal crimes, as Figure 2 displays, showing the steadily growing share of federal criminal prosecutions. Firearms prosecutions have steadily grown in number over the past decade (particularly since 2015), reaching over 6,000 cases per year.\textsuperscript{280} In contrast, drug cases have modestly declined (to about 20,000 cases per year), fraud cases have declined (from almost 9,000 to about 6,000 cases), while immigration cases have dramatically increased in


\textsuperscript{278} See Beale, supra note 44 at 44 (noting that the “key criminal investigative agencies” included the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms); \textit{see also Rabin, supra note 266, at 1054-55} (describing and cataloging agency referrals, including from ATF).

\textsuperscript{279} Source data on file with author.

Changes in federal enforcement approaches shed light on why these trends can be observed, and also suggest that firearms prosecutions have played a role in the accompanying rise in immigration cases.

B. Collaborative Enforcement

In contrast to those federal statistics, which demonstrate rising numbers of federal prosecutions, longer sentences, and generally suggest a more punitive federal role, some of the most effective enforcement efforts by the late 1990s were collaborative federal, state, and local (and sometimes also public/private) partnerships designed to reduce youth and gang violence. Since the 1990s, these efforts “resulted in a ten-fold increase in the number of federal felon-in-possession prisoners at a cost of several billion dollars.” As David Patton observes, “the stated reason for the federalization of gun cases was, and remains, stiff federal sentences in the name of reducing violent crime.”

Our focus in this Article is on the trajectory of federal firearms crimes. Yet state firearms crime enforcement has also shifted over the past few decades. Many state offenses have long involved conduct that included possession of firearms. All states and the District of Columbia have statutes regarding carrying firearms, and all have criminal laws concerning possession, use, sales, and trafficking of firearms, just as the federal government does. Relying upon FBI data, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that arrest rates for such firearms offenses more than doubled in the three decades after 1965, with arrests concentrated in urban areas, arrest rates rising dramatically for teenage males, and arrest rates five times greater for Black than White persons. Nor is the move towards harsher sentencing exclusively federal. In the 1980s, average weapons sentences were higher for state prisoners; however, by the 1990s, as revisions to the sentencing guidelines took effect, they were much higher for federal cases. By the mid-1990s, most states had

281 See id. (noting the dramatic increase in immigration prosecutions in fiscal year 2018, when “[t]he 23,883 immigration cases represented a 16.5 percent increase from the 20,496 cases reported in fiscal year 2017,” and that almost 43% of federal defendants were noncitizens).
282 See DOJ STRATEGY, supra note 221, at 2 (“In response to the President’s directive, the Secretary of the Treasury and the Attorney General directed all U.S. Attorneys and ATF Field Division Directors jointly to develop locally coordinated gun violence reduction strategies in each of the 94 federal judicial districts across the United States.”).
283 Patton, supra note 158, at 1429-30.
284 Id. at 1430.
287 See id. at 2-3 (graphing these statistics).
288 See id. at 5 (comparing federal and state sentence lengths).
mandatory minimum sentences for certain weapons offenses.\textsuperscript{289} While state court verdicts account for the vast bulk of felony convictions in the U.S., which is true for weapons offenses as well, about 10\% of felony weapons convictions occurred in federal court by the mid-1990s (whereas only 4\% of felony convictions in total occurred in federal court).\textsuperscript{290} Some of these statutory and sentencing-related changes occurred in tandem between state and federal lawmakers and enforcers. Some of the shift in the states towards more severe and aggressive state firearms enforcement can also be accounted for by federal resources and efforts.\textsuperscript{291}

The modern federal-state-local collaboration formally began in 1991 when Attorney General Richard Thornburgh “announced the federal initiative Project Triggerlock, which directed federal prosecutors to work with state and local authorities to federally prosecute gun possession cases in order to impose stiffer sentences than state courts would otherwise impose.”\textsuperscript{292} Its effects can be seen in data in Figures 1 and 2 from Part II.A, which show an upward trend beginning in the early 1990s. This represents an almost ten-fold increase in the two decades after the initiative went into effect.\textsuperscript{293} The main driver of the program was increased and consistent prosecution of felon-in-possession cases.\textsuperscript{294} By 1992, the Justice Department already noted “the increase in firearms prosecutions resulting from the implementation of Project Triggerlock,” and stated that as a result “federal prosecutors have been faced with a variety of legal issues relating to federal firearms law.”\textsuperscript{295} But carrying out this goal of greater enforcement meant “[t]he systematic involvement of the federal government in prosecuting gun cases that were the result of local police arrests, and that would have otherwise been prosecuted in state court.”\textsuperscript{296} This would raise many questions as such programs expanded throughout the ensuing decades.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{289} See id. at 6 (“41 States have mandatory minimum sentences to prison for certain weapons offenses.”).
\item \textsuperscript{290} Id. at 5; see also id. at 6 (“[I]n 1991 an estimated 12,700 weapons offenders were in State prisons, and 3,100 were in Federal prisons”).
\item \textsuperscript{291} See, e.g., id. at 6 (noting the use of increased penalties for gun use in a crime at both the state and federal level).
\item \textsuperscript{292} Patton, supra note 158, at 1440.
\item \textsuperscript{293} See infra Section II.A figs. 1 & 2; see also David E. Patton, Criminal Justice Reform and Guns: The Irresistible Movement Meets the Immovable Object, 69 EMORY L.J. 1011, 1012 (2020) (“In the first twenty years after Thornburgh’s announcement, the number of people serving time in federal prison for weapons possession jumped dramatically, a nearly tenfold increase from approximately 3,400 (5.8\% of all federal prisoners) in 1990 to over 32,000 (15.1\% of all federal prisoners) in 2011.”).
\item \textsuperscript{294} Id.
\item \textsuperscript{296} Patton, supra note 158, at 1441.
\end{itemize}
In Boston, “Operation Ceasefire” efforts began in 1996 when “researchers from Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government joined with local federal law enforcement agencies and prosecutors to begin a focused, deterrence-based program” to combat youth gun violence.297 The program involved targeted enforcement against gangs, but also messaging “zero tolerance” for gun violence, combined with “sessions with targeted offenders, law enforcement and their community partners—such as, the clergy, youth advocates and job counselors”—to “use moral suasion and offer access to such things as social and medical services, jobs, and educational opportunities that provide alternatives to violence.”298 Thus, police and prosecutors “make clear that offenders have a choice: they can continue to break the law and face severe sanctions, or they can turn their lives around, with the help of service providers.”299 In Boston, these included the “Boston Jobs Project” by the U.S. Attorney, the Boston Police Commissioner, the District Attorney, and others, supported by federal funding.300

In 1997, the Department of Justice launched Project Exile in Richmond, Virginia, funneling gun-related state and local arrests into federal court to get the “benefit” of harsher federal penalties.301 This occurred “at a time when Richmond had one of the highest homicide rates in the country.”302 As Dan Richman observed, the project received bipartisan praise, as well as praise both from gun-regulationponent Sarah Brady and the NRA, which funded educational programs as part of the program in Richmond schools.303 The project involved the allocation of federal resources and prosecutorial power to support local efforts, raising federalism concerns.304 A federal court, while dismissing a constitutional challenge to the program, expressed

297 Id. at 1447; see also DAVID M. KENNEDY, DON’T SHOOT: ONE MAN, A STREET FELLOWSHIP, AND THE END OF VIOLENCE IN INNER-CITY AMERICA 44-75 (2012) (describing the history and implementation of Boston’s Operation Ceasefire).

298 DOJ STRATEGY, supra note 223.

299 Id.

300 Id.

301 See Jeffrey Fagan, Policing Guns and Youth Violence, THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN, Summer/Fall 2002 135 tbl.1 (describing various police approaches across the country that were aimed at curbing, inter alia, gun violence).

302 Patton, supra note 158, at 1447.

303 See Richman, supra note 273, at 372-73 (describing the praise received from various individuals and entities); see also Patton, supra note 158, at 1448 (“[Project Exile] was touted at the time as a tremendous success and received bipartisan praise.”).

304 See Richman, supra note 273, at 411 (“[T]he legacy of Project Exile . . . may be a serious challenge to the idea of federal enforcement policy in areas where federal, state, and local authority most overlap.”).
concerns regarding discrimination and noted that federal prosecutions avoided local and far more diverse juries.\textsuperscript{305}

Project Exile received so much positive attention as a local experiment that it soon provided a template for a national program. In the early 2000s, DOJ launched Project Safe Neighborhoods (“PSN”), building on those earlier efforts.\textsuperscript{306} PSN became “the federal government’s most formal and extensive expansion into local law enforcement.”\textsuperscript{307} President George W. Bush announced the expansion as based on a need for a “focused national strategy” to curtail violent crime.\textsuperscript{308} Then-Attorney General John Ashcroft explained the program as “disarmingly simple: federal, state and local law enforcement officers and prosecutors working together to investigate, arrest and prosecute criminals with guns to get the maximum penalties available under state or federal law.”\textsuperscript{309} The PSN program “resulted from public discourse of the ‘gun problem’ amid a tough-on-crime political backdrop.”\textsuperscript{310}

Bonita Gardner observes that the federal government “committed more than $900 million for [PSN] over the first three years,” the result of which was that “federal gun prosecutions nationwide increased by seventy-three percent” from 2000-2005.\textsuperscript{311} Once again, concerns arose and were litigated regarding the manner in which largely Black neighborhoods were selected as

\begin{thebibliography}{100}
\bibitem{305} See United States v. Jones, 36 F. Supp. 2d 304, 311-12 (E.D. Va. 1999) (“[I]f, as proponents of Project Exile maintain, there are disparities in the effectiveness of federal and state prosecutions, then those disparities only increase the potential for discriminatory diversions for federal prosecution absent some form of review.”).
\bibitem{307} Patton, supra note 158, at 1449.
\bibitem{308} William Partlett, Criminal Law and Cooperative Federalism, 56 AM. CRIM. L. REV. 1663, 1676 (2019).
\bibitem{311} Bonita R. Gardner, Separate and Unequal: Federal Tough-on-Guns Program Targets Minority Communities for Selective Enforcement, 12 MICH. J. RACE & L. 305, 311 (2007); see also, Comment, Victoria L. Killion, No Points for the Assist? A Closer Look at the Role of Special Assistant United States Attorneys in the Cooperative Model of Federal Prosecutions, 82 TEMPLE L. REV. 789, 797 (2009) (“In 2005, the Department of Justice . . . reported a seventy-three percent increase in the number of firearms cases filed nationwide in federal courts in the five years since the federal government had launched the program.”). The funding has now topped $1 billion. See Ben Grunwald & Andrew V. Papachristos, Project Safe Neighborhoods in Chicago: Looking Back a Decade Later, 107 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 131, 132 (2017) (“Since 2001, Congress has allocated over a billion dollars to the U.S. Attorney’s Office to oversee PSN programs in the 94 federal districts.”).
\end{thebibliography}
sites for these prosecution efforts. Research on the effectiveness of the programs has been decidedly mixed. Nevertheless, such programs have continued to expand. In 2017, then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions stated that “Project Safe Neighborhoods is . . . the centerpiece of our crime reduction strategy.” President Trump described a commitment to “restore” the project as “one of the most effective crime prevention strategies in America.”

And in November 2019, the Trump Administration launched Project Guardian. As then-Attorney General Barr said when announcing the program, “Project Guardian is a national initiative to comprehensively attack gun violence through the aggressive enforcement of existing gun laws.” Guardian, he said, “will be in every district. The idea is to use our existing gun laws to incapacitate the most dangerous and violent offenders.”

In contrast to PSN and Project Guardian, in which cooperative federalism has been championed, the cooperative federalism approach to improving compliance with NICS has been less successful, and the federal government has not sought to impose penalties for noncompliance. Prosecutors play the role, in individual cases, as the enforcers of gun prosecution priorities. Financial incentives and penalties, in contrast, provide more indirect (and it seems less effective) means to carry out federal priorities.

312 See Gardner, supra note 311, at 316-17 (“According to statistics presented in the Eastern District of Michigan, almost ninety percent of those prosecuted under Project Safe Neighborhoods are African American.”); see, e.g., United States v. Hubbard, Crim. No. 04-80321, 2006 WL 1374047, at *1 (E.D. Mich. May 17, 2006) (“Petitioner argues that Project Safe Neighborhoods is targeted at African-Americans, and therefore that he was subject to racially selective prosecution.”); see also Shreifeter, supra note 2, at 160 (“Federal programs have existed for twenty-six years to ensure the most aggressive enforcement of gun laws and have been set up to systemically target Black communities.”).

313 See, e.g., Papachristos, Meares & Eagan, supra note 310, at 254 (reporting Chicago’s implementation of PSN showed promise in reducing the city’s homicide rate); id. at 227-28 (discussing conflicting studies on the effectiveness of Operation Ceasefire and Project Exile); Grunwald & Papachristos, supra note 310, at 135 (finding minimal long-term effects of PSN Chicago).


317 Id.

C. Immigration Prosecution and Guns

Federal gun prosecutions play an increasing role in immigration-related enforcement. Federal arrests of non-U.S. citizens have increased sharply in contrast to the overall rate of arrests: between 1998 and 2018, arrests of immigrants increased by 233.5%, while arrests of U.S. citizens increased by only 10%. These arrests also represent a cooperative federalism story: The bulk of these arrests are initiated only after local and state law enforcement make arrests and conduct immigration screening.

Weapons charges represent a substantial portion of these federal immigration arrests, although to be sure, they still represent a far larger portion of arrests of citizens than of noncitizens. In 2018, law enforcement conducted 10,562 arrests for weapons charges, and 10,077 (95.6%) persons arrested were U.S. citizens. This figure represents 14.3% of total arrests of U.S. citizens. Meanwhile, 468 (4.4%) were of noncitizens, and these arrests represented only 0.4% of arrests of noncitizens. Prosecution rates, on the other hand, tended to be higher: in 2018, 4% of suspects prosecuted on weapons charges in U.S. District Court were noncitizens. ICE also reports non-criminal administrative arrests. In 2019, there were 10,278 total weapons offenses for such administrative arrests. There were 3,281 total criminal charges and 6,997 criminal convictions.

In a related cooperative federalism point, civil immigration enforcement has made greater use of state, not federal, gun offenses. ICE also highlights its work: “[F]irearms, ammunition, and explosives smuggling investigations have resulted in unprecedented bi-lateral interdictions, investigations and information-sharing activities that identify, disrupt, and dismantle transnational criminal networks operating within the United States, Mexico, Canada, Central America, the Caribbean, and around the World.” In 2015,

320 See Eisha Jain, The Interior Structure of Immigration Enforcement, 167 U. Pa. L. Rev. 1463, 1477 (2019) (“Since 2013 ... every custodial criminal arrest ... has triggered immigration screening.”); Hiroshi Motomura, The Discretion That Matters: Federal Immigration Enforcement, State and Local Arrests, and the Civil-Criminal Line, 58 UCLA L. Rev. 1819, 1858 (2011) (“[B]ecause the federal government has exercised minimal post-arrest discretion, the key decisionmaking moment has been the initial identification of a potentially removable noncitizen by some form of arrest.”).
321 Motivans, supra note 319, at 10.
322 Id.
323 Id.
324 Id. at 18.
326 Id.
ICE implemented a Priority Enforcement Policy in order to focus on particular categories of undocumented immigrants.\footnote{\textsuperscript{328} ICE implemented a Priority Enforcement Policy in order to focus on particular categories of undocumented immigrants.} Firearms possession was contained in the Priority 2 category, which included misdemeanants and new immigration violators.\footnote{\textsuperscript{329} In 2015, 14,869 out of 139,368 convicted criminal removals, or 11\%, fell into priority 2.} In 2016, 31,936 out of 238,466 civil priority removals, or 13.3\%, fell into Priority 2.\footnote{\textsuperscript{330} Thus, many of these civil removals include state, not federal, firearms offenses.} What both Project Safe Neighborhoods and ICE’s Priority Enforcement Policy have in common is that local and state cases are shifted over to federal authorities, who take custody of an individual and impose civil immigration and sometimes additional criminal consequences based on gun-involved conduct.

### III. Towards a Unified View of Federal Gun Crimes

In Part I, we described the evolution of three families of federal crimes: early gun statutes, possession-focused statutes, and modern regulatory statutes that aim higher upstream by trying to deter unlawful transfers. In Part II, we turned to how these statutes have been enforced. In this Part, we turn to implications for this entire body of law, which has not been treated as unified and has evolved piecemeal, often based on distinct policy interests. We (1) identify patterns and observations from descriptions and data in the previous Parts, (2) lay out pathologies with the current federal criminal legal approach to firearms, and (3) chart the path forward to a more just, reasonable, and coherent approach to federal regulation of guns.

#### A. The Patterns

We find three themes in the trajectory of the laws traced in Parts I and II: the legislative compromise on severe punishment; the dichotomizing treatment that aims to secure guns for the “good guys” and keep them from the “bad guys”; and the limited judicial check on federal prosecution of gun crimes.
1. The Severity Compromise

Gun laws operate uniquely in the space of social regulatory policy. First and foremost, the core federal gun crimes often serve as sentencing enhancers for a range of other federal offenses: as the Department of Justice puts it simply, “Federal firearms laws provide severe penalties for firearms use by the violent offender or drug trafficker.” The § 924(c) sentencing provisions require lengthy five-, seven-, ten-, or even thirty-year mandatory minimum sentences for possessing, brandishing, or discharging a gun in the course of a drug trafficking crime or a crime of violence, with twenty-five year mandatory sentences for each subsequent conviction. Further, these sentences cannot be concurrent with any other felony or state sentence. Similarly, the related Armed Career Criminal Act (ACCA), contained in 18 U.S.C. § 924(e), requires a fifteen-year mandatory minimum sentence.

Over time, Congress has extended the length of these mandatory minimum sentences, transforming a single sentence of § 924(c) into a detailed sentencing code, which in turn has engendered a detailed case law. As the Department of Justice summarizes: “Firearms violations should be aggressively used in prosecuting violent crime. They are generally simple and quick to prove. The mandatory and enhanced punishments for many firearms violations can be used as leverage to gain plea bargaining and cooperation from offenders.” And, as Benjamin Levin observes, “gun possession statutes bear the heavy mark of the sharply retributive turn that U.S. criminal justice policy took over the latter portion of the twentieth century.”

The U.S. Sentencing Commission, in a 2018 report on mandatory minimums in firearm offenses, found “[f]irearms offenses accounted for 16.8 percent of offenses carrying a mandatory minimum penalty in fiscal year

---

332 See SPITZER, supra note 39, at ch.1 (explaining how gun regulations are best described as part of social regulatory policy).


337 See supra Part I.

338 U.S. DEP’T OF JUST., supra note 333.


of Pennslyvania Law Review  [Vol. 170: 637

2016—the second largest category following drug offenses—increasing from 14.4 percent in fiscal year 2010.”\textsuperscript{341} The Commission also reported stark racial disparities in those convicted of federal firearms offenses, where over half of those convicted under § 924(c) were Black and almost 30 percent Latin.\textsuperscript{342} Those disparities, however, may arise not from sentencing, but from the targeting of federal firearms prosecutions through programs such as those described in Part II.

As a matter of politics, these enhancements are fairly uncontroversial.\textsuperscript{343} “Mandatory sentencing or sentence-enhancement for crimes committed with a gun are politically popular because they offer an apparent means of controlling gun violence without apparent cost to law-abiding gun owners.”\textsuperscript{344} They are often the one measure both pro- and anti-gun regulation advocates can agree on, leading to a “crucial point of consensus” on guns: “Both sides of the gun control debate have occasionally compromised, and these compromises have generally yielded criminal statutes designed to impose harsh punishments on unlawful gun owners.” Or, as Jonathan Simon puts it: “both sides of the gun debate share a remarkably similar perception that lethal violence poses a significant and ongoing threat to their personal security, and their ability to protect their homes and families.”\textsuperscript{346}

This emphasis on severity in the statute has sometimes resulted from congressional response to narrowing constructions by the Supreme Court, but just as often due to the Court’s own interpretations. As we have discussed, § 924(c) has undergone several revisions, often in response to Supreme Court rulings that Congress thought had construed it too narrowly.\textsuperscript{347} In \textit{Simpson v. United States}, the Court held that a defendant could


\textsuperscript{342} Id. at 6.

\textsuperscript{343} See Milton Heumann, Colin Loftin & David McDowall, Federal Firearms Policy and Mandatory Sentencing, 73 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 1051, 1051 (1982) (noting that policy “requiring a mandatory sentence for the use of a firearm in the commission of a federal felony . . . is widely supported by the public and the police . . .”).


\textsuperscript{345} Levin, supra note 35, at 2192. Elizabeth Hinton makes a similar point about early efforts to restrict firearm use and ownership. See \textit{ELIZABETH HINTON, FROM THE WAR ON POVERTY TO THE WAR ON CRIME: THE MAKING OF MASS INCARCERATION IN AMERICA} 265 (2016) (ebook) (“[President Gerald] Ford’s attack on low-cost firearms did, however, receive an outpouring of support from ardent gun control opponents such as Republican National Committee chairman Bob Dole and Senate Republican leader Hugh Scott, even if the measure seemed to contradict the Republican Party’s strong commitment to the second amendment.”).


\textsuperscript{347} See supra Part I.B.1.
not be sentenced for both the § 924(c) offense and an underlying crime that already provided enhanced penalties for using a weapon. Two years later in Busic v. United States, it explained that Simpson did not give the Government the authority to choose whichever of the two offenses generated a greater sentence. Instead, “prosecution and enhanced sentencing under § 924(c) is simply not permissible where the predicate felony statute contains its own enhancement provision.” Congress was not that harsh, thought the Court. “[B]y rejecting double enhancement,” the Court said, its decision in Simpson had “expose[d] the stark and unidimensional quality of any calculus which attempts to construe the statute on the basis of an assumption that in enacting § 924(c) Congress’ sole objective was to increase the penalties for firearm use to the maximum extent possible.” Congress clarified its unidimensional intent when it amended the provision in 1984. As the Court later said, “Congress thus repudiated the result” from Simpson and Busic.

Similarly, in its 1995 ruling in Bailey v. United States, the Court interpreted “use” as active employment of the firearm and more than “mere possession.” Congress’s “Bailey fix” amended § 924(c) again to clarify that mere possession in furtherance of a crime is, in fact, grounds for enhancement.

But with these few exceptions, many of the Court’s decisions under § 924(c) rejected interpretations of the statute that might have narrowed its reach. In 1993, in Deal v. United States, for example, the Court read the statute broadly, ruling that additional penalties for a “second or subsequent conviction” could result from a second 924(c) conviction in the same proceeding as the first. That same year, it concluded that “use” of a gun in a crime included trading the gun for drugs. In Muscarello v. United States,

348 See Simpson v. United States, 435 U.S. 6, 16 (1978) (holding defendant could not be sentenced under both § 924(c) and another statute arising from the same bank robbery because the other statute already provided for more severe penalties when a firearm was involved in the offense).
349 See Busic v. United States, 446 U.S. 398, 399-400 (1979) (“We hold that the sentence received by such a defendant may be enhanced only under the enhancement provision in the statute defining the felony he committed and that § 924(c) does not apply in such a case.”).
350 Id. at 404.
351 Id. at 409.
352 See United States v. Gonzales, 520 U.S. 1, 10 (1997) (describing Congress’s amendment to § 924(c), “thus repudiate[ing] the result [the Court] reached in Busic”).
353 Id.
354 Bailey v. United States, 516 U.S. 137, 143 (1995) (holding the word “use” in § 924(c) “must connote more than mere possession of a firearm by a person who commits a drug offense.”).
356 Id. at 13 (rejecting a technical reading that would have restricted the scope of the statute).
the Court held a person “carries” a gun during a crime even when the gun is locked in the trunk or glove compartment of a traveling vehicle.\(^{359}\)

Writing in the early 1980s, as harsh mandatory sentences began to sweep across the country and eventually through Congress, some researchers initially described these laws as “something like a criminological wonder drug—a plan to reduce violent crime at minimal cost with no serious side effects.”\(^{360}\) Black community leaders initially supported many of the laws that prescribed harsh sentences for unlawful gun use because they wanted to show that Black victims of gun violence mattered.\(^{361}\) As James Forman thoroughly documents, law enforcement had for so long neglected the crime in Black communities and shrugged off the deaths of Black citizens that the response of those living in these communities was to call for greater enforcement and tougher punishment.\(^{362}\) Many joined in the increasingly common calls that were then epitomizing the American criminal justice system: “When you want to stop people from doing something, take away discretion and impose more prison time.”\(^{363}\)

There is, then, a dual pressure in gun laws toward increasingly punitive treatment. Proponents of “gun control” want legislation to control firearms based on the harm they can cause. Opponents of gun control want to make sure that law-abiding citizens are not inconvenienced in their sporting, hunting, and defense uses. As sociologist Jennifer Carlson writes, “[t]his is the often-overlooked common ground of the gun control and gun rights lobbies in the late twentieth century: both endorsed policies that harshly sanctioned the kinds of gun criminals associated with urban street crime.”\(^{364}\) We see this play out in the types of gun crimes that gain the attention of federal prosecutors and the public.

2. The Enforcement Emphasis

The severity framework reveals a related fact about the federal criminal framework: the entire structure revolves around aiming to secure, protect, and defend the rights of law-abiding citizens to keep and bear guns while visiting extreme punishment on the bad apples. We recognize both the devastating harm guns can do and the impulse to use all the levers to punish criminal misuse. We also recognize the impulse to protect some beneficial use


\(^{360}\) Heumann, Loftin & McDowall, supra note 343, at 1052. Researchers came to disavow this view. Id.


\(^{362}\) See id. at 56 (describing police indifference to Black crime deaths).

\(^{363}\) Id. at 61.

of guns. As Forman notes, “a gun may be the only dangerous item that can plausibly be viewed as a solution to the very danger it poses.”

Those competing impulses have resulted in an approach to drafting, enforcing, and applying the federal gun laws that focuses on possession offenses. Instead of prioritizing holding manufacturers, distributors, and dealers to account, federal prosecutors focus on bringing charges against street-level offenders, often in conjunction with prosecuting other statutes.

Instead of licensing or registration systems to vet gun users and track the flow of guns, Congress passes laws stacking mandatory minimums for use or possession of a gun in a crime. Indeed, this disjunction was intentional. As William Vizzard chronicles:

For most of the Reagan and Bush administrations, the opponents of [firearm] controls dominated the agenda. ATF shifted its attention away from commerce in firearms and concentrated almost exclusively on armed felons and drug traffickers. With this change, ATF’s resources began to increase markedly as it became an integral part of the administration’s war on drugs. Within the agency, the message was clear: avoid all contact with any activity perceived as gun control.

As a result, gun crime policy at the federal level is largely reactive and not proactive, focusing on severely punishing those who have already broken the law (regardless of whether the present firearms-related activity is deserving of severe punishment). It seizes on the outgroups that are often unpopular with legislators and the voters they represent. As Benjamin Levin points out, “the NRA and other opponents of gun control regulation have frequently made an exception for criminal statutes. These statutes reflect a popular motto of the NRA—‘guns don’t kill people; people kill people.’”

---

365 FORMAN, supra note 361, at 64.
366 Gardner, supra note 311, at 312 (observing that prosecutors focus almost exclusively on 922(g) and 924(c) while “[t]he other twenty major federal gun crimes—including gun trafficking, corrupt gun dealers, stolen guns, selling to minors, obliterating serial numbers, and lying on the background check form—are almost never prosecuted.”).
367 See Abbott v. United States, 562 U.S. 8, 17 (2010) (discussing several steps Congress took to increase the severity of § 924(c) offenses).
368 Vizzard, Impact, supra note 36, at 343 (footnotes omitted); see also id. at 345 (“ATF has characterized itself as a law enforcement agency using the gun laws to impact crime and not as a gun control agency.”).
369 The laws may still be prevention oriented, at least in theory, based on a belief these groups will misuse firearms. See Shreffler, supra note 92, at 154 (“Based on the assumptions underlying the ‘felon in possession’ statute, it is clear that this statute criminalizes a possibility of harm rather than actual harm.”).
370 See Douglas N. Husak, Guns and Drugs: Case Studies on the Principled Limits of the Criminal Sanction, 23 L. & PHIL. 437, 479 (2004) (“Felons, drug users or illegal aliens who are punished for unlawful gun possession are unlikely to attract much sympathy from a public that tends to believe that our state treats criminals too leniently.”).
371 Levin, supra note 35, at 2222.
3. The Limited Judicial Check

Federal gun crimes have been frequently litigated, and these cases have affected the interpretation of the statutes. But if there is one key lesson from what we have described, it is that the body of case law that has developed has left the core power of these statutes and of prosecutors largely intact. As one example, consider § 924(c), providing enhanced punishment for certain uses or possession of firearms in the commission of a felony. The Congressional Research Service has noted that this provision has withstood constitutional challenges based on the Second Amendment’s right to bear arms; the Eighth Amendment’s cruel and unusual punishments prohibition; the Sixth Amendment’s right to a jury trial; the Fifth Amendment’s double jeopardy and due process prescriptions; and the Constitution’s structural limitations on the preservation of the separation of powers and on Congress’s authority under the Commerce Clause.372

Nor has the Second Amendment posed much, if any barrier, to the other federal criminal statutes. Separating a firearm rights-bearer from a firearm lawbreaker can be a fine line that often depends on unobservable factors like criminal or mental health history or present intent.373 Those lines have been largely defined by the criminal statutes described. They have not (to date) been reconsidered by the U.S. Supreme Court, which in District of Columbia v. Heller struck down a Washington D.C. handgun ban, but highlighted that it did not call into question “longstanding prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms.”374 Lower courts have largely agreed that §§ 922, 924(c), and ACCA are not affected by Heller.375

Similarly, the federalism restrictions that accompany a government of limited power have not posed much of a barrier. Gun crimes have been the


373 Husak, supra note 372, at 454 (“The same characteristics that make a gun useful for criminal purposes are those that make it useful for legitimate purposes as well—most notably, for self-protection. Whatever may be the case with illicit drugs, it is impossible to identify a kind of gun that is widely used unlawfully but lacks a legitimate purpose.”).


375 United States v. Napolitan, 762 F.3d 297, 311 (3d Cir. 2014); United States v. Bryant, 711 F.3d 364, 368-70 (2d Cir. 2013) (per curiam); United States v. Potter, 630 F.3d 1260, 1261 (9th Cir. 2011) (per curiam); United States v. Jackson, 535 F.3d 635, 636 (7th Cir. 2009). But see, e.g., Binderup v. Att’y Gen., 836 F.3d 336, 357 (3d Cir. 2016) (en banc) (upholding Second Amendment challenge to § 922(g)(1) for two individuals as the government failed to present enough evidence to bar two individuals from possessing firearms in their homes).
subject of several U.S. Supreme Court rulings regarding the reach of enumerated federal power and federalism. In this Article, we have not focused on the jurisdictional questions that firearms raise when federal prosecutions are brought largely because the Supreme Court has made clear that federal prosecutors have broad-reaching authority to apply federal firearms statutes to local offenders.

The Court first ruled on the 1968 felon-in-possession statute in United States v. Bass, rejecting the Department of Justice’s position that the criminal statute created jurisdiction over any felon possessing a firearm, and interpreting the statute to require a connection with interstate commerce. However, the Bass Court explained that a firearm itself that “previously travelled in interstate commerce” might satisfy the Commerce Clause, as applied to a particular federal possession prosecution. The Court then adopted that approach in its 1977 ruling in Scarborough v. United States, stating that the government need only show that the firearm had at some time previously travelled in interstate commerce. In its important federalism ruling in United States v. Lopez, the Court nevertheless indicated that any Commerce Clause concern can be satisfied through the use of a jurisdictional element connected to a firearm, an item that itself travels in interstate commerce.

The ubiquity of firearms, almost all of which have previously travelled across state lines simply by virtue of their manufacture and distribution, makes the reach of federal firearms statutes extremely broad and readily satisfies the jurisdictional requirements as defined by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The overlapping provisions in the statute, however, mean that judicial review plays only a haphazard role in restraining prosecution efforts; thus while the Court in United States v. Watson stated that acquiring a gun during a drug transaction did not amount to “use,” lower courts have held that

---

376 Beale, supra note 35, at 1643.
377 Patton, supra note 293, at 301 (noting how in the 1990s prosecutors “shifted their focus away from crimes with obvious interstate connections to crimes that were once thought of as purely local” when they started pursuing gun crimes with increased fervor).
379 Id. at 350 (finding prosecutors must allege and prove a connection to interstate commerce in a federal firearms prosecution but noting how readily that standard can be satisfied).
380 431 U.S. 563, 566-67, 577 (1977) (“[T]here is no question that Congress intended no more than a minimal nexus requirement.”).
381 514 U.S. 549, 561 (1995) (“[The statute] contains no jurisdictional element which would ensure, through case-by-case inquiry, that the firearm possession in question affects interstate commerce.”).
doing so may be “in furtherance” of the predicate drug crimes under § 924(c).\textsuperscript{384} The aiding and abetting offense, even as interpreted in a modestly more narrow fashion by the Court, remains quite broad.\textsuperscript{385}

Similarly, in its Sixth Amendment rulings, such as \textit{Alleyne v. United States}, the Court has held that elements, such as the brandishing element, are sentence enhancers that must be presented to the jury.\textsuperscript{386} The severity of the sentencing enhancements plays a role in the Court’s reasoning; as it put it in \textit{United States v. O’Brien}, “[t]he immense danger posed by machineguns, the moral depravity in choosing the weapon, and the substantial increase in the minimum sentence provided by the statute support the conclusion that this prohibition is an element of the crime, not a sentencing factor.”\textsuperscript{387} Yet, where the vast majority of federal prosecutions settle in plea bargaining,\textsuperscript{388} such rulings do not significantly impact prosecution efforts.\textsuperscript{389} Further, where Congress has perceived a problem in how courts have interpreted federal gun crimes, it has reacted swiftly, such as in its § 924(c) post-Bailey fix.\textsuperscript{390}

That said, things might be changing. The Supreme Court has recently, in the past half-decade, struck down or severely restricted the scope of several major federal gun crimes. The Supreme Court’s 2015 ruling in \textit{Johnson v. United States} struck down as unconstitutionally vague the residual clause in ACCA that included as a predicate offense a nonenumerated felony that “otherwise involves conduct that presents a serious potential risk of physical injury to another.”\textsuperscript{391} Just a few years later, the Court in \textit{United States v. Davis} said part of § 924(c) was infected with the same vagueness problems.\textsuperscript{392}

\textsuperscript{384} \textit{United States v. Gurka}, 605 F.3d 40, 44 (1st Cir. 2010) (“We join the three circuits holding \textit{Watson} does not affect the prong of 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)(3)(B) concerned with ‘possession in furtherance.’”).

\textsuperscript{385} See, e.g., \textit{Rosemond v. United States}, 572 U.S. 65, 74 (2014) (“Rosemond therefore could assist in §924(c)’s violation by facilitating either the drug transaction or the firearms use (or of course both).”).

\textsuperscript{386} \textit{570 U.S. 99, 117 (2013)} (“Because the finding of brandishing increased the penalty to which the defendant was subjected, it was an element, which had to be found by the jury beyond a reasonable doubt.”).

\textsuperscript{387} \textit{560 U.S. 218, 230 (2010)}.  

\textsuperscript{388} \textit{Carissa Byrne Hessick, Punishment Without Trial: Why Plea Bargaining Is A Bad Deal} 22 (2021) (“Since 1995 the guilty plea rate has remained above 90 percent [of adjudicated cases]”).

\textsuperscript{389} Stephen Schulhofer and Ilene Nagel documented in the late 1980s the degree to which federal prosecutors use § 924(c) for charge bargaining, following the enactment of the Sentencing Guidelines. See Stephen J. Schulhofer & Ilene H. Nagel, \textit{Negotiated Pleas Under the Federal Sentencing Guidelines: The First Fifteen Months}, 27 AM. CRIM. L. REV. 231, 281 (1989) (describing how federal prosecutors can induce a plea from a defendant by offering to drop corresponding weapon counts under § 924(c)).

\textsuperscript{390} \textit{See Abbott v. United States}, 562 U.S. 8, 16-17 (2010) (describing Congressional legislation to bring possession of a firearm within the scope of § 924(c) in reaction to the holding in \textit{Bailey} three years earlier).


\textsuperscript{392} \textit{139 S. Ct. 2319, 2336 (2019)}. 
Similarly, the 2019 ruling in *Rehaif v. United States* found a problem affecting all firearm possession crimes.\(^{393}\) There, the petitioner, a noncitizen, had been expelled from a university in Florida, ending his lawful status on a student visa.\(^{394}\) He was arrested after using firearms at a shooting range under § 922(g), which prohibits certain persons, including those without lawful immigration status, to possess a firearm in or affecting interstate commerce; the penalty provision in § 924(a)(2) imposes punishment on one who “knowingly violates” § 922.\(^{395}\) The Court concluded that this mens rea term from § 924 applies to all § 922(g) offenses (relying on the Model Penal Code, no less).\(^{396}\) Further, the Court discussed legislative history, finding that it was inconclusive on the question of mens rea.\(^{397}\)

Justice Breyer, writing for the majority, in holding the statutes required knowledge of status as well as conduct, noted that the revised legislation included statements by drafters that “the absence of a scienter requirement in the prior statutes had resulted in ‘severe penalties for unintentional missteps.’”\(^{398}\) “The firearms provisions before us,” he explained, “are not part of a regulatory or public welfare program, and they carry a potential penalty of 10 years in prison that we have previously described as ‘harsh.’”\(^{399}\)

The opinion might have broader implications for the Court’s interpretation of statutory mens rea or, as Jessica Roth notes, “it could all just be about the guns.”\(^{400}\) What the opinion represents, though, is the Court interpreting across firearms provisions—from the sentencing provisions in § 924, to the elements set out in § 922—considering both the legislative history and the harshness of the resulting penalties. Such reasoning, with echoes of the Court’s reasoning in *Bass* and other prior rulings, does represent increasing judicial engagement. In the past, such rulings, as noted, have not strongly affected core enforcement. In many cases, showing knowledge will not be challenging for prosecutors. The Court, given Congress’ response to past rulings, might be unlikely to go farther than a holistic interpretation of text across provisions in the statute. If so, then any more lasting change would need to be legislative.

---

393 139 S. Ct. 2191 (2019).
394 Id. at 2194, 2201.
395 Id. at 2194.
396 Id. at 2195 (quoting ALI, Model Penal Code § 2.02(4), p. 22 (1985)).
397 Id. at 2197-99.
398 Id. at 2199 (citing 132 Cong. Rec. 9590 (1986) (statement of Sen. Hatch)).
399 Id. at 2197.
B. The Pathologies

Although many of the pathologies of the federal gun crime regime stand out just from the description of the patterns in the prior section, we highlight here two deeper ones: the irrationality of the severe sentencing approach and the race and class inequities in the system.

1. A Broken Proportionality

Even as sentencing enhancements form a core bedrock of federal gun crime policy, they are imposed sporadically and haphazardly. Prosecutors have nearly unlimited discretion to choose which gun cases to take federal, resulting in a system of wide disparity. As a result, offend[ers] are subject to a kind of cruel lottery, in which a small minority of the persons who commit a particular offense is selected for federal prosecution and subjected to much harsher sentences—and often to significantly less favorable procedural or substantive standards—than persons prosecuted for parallel state offenses. 401

This leads to outcomes at odds with sound penal theory and with the stated goals of the Sentencing Guidelines themselves: to reduce unwarranted sentencing disparities for similar conduct. 402

The lack of relationship between culpability and punishment—that the same gun crime can be punished much more severely if it happens to occur on “federal day”—is one sign of a severely broken system. 403 But even if the punishment were imposed consistently, that would not be much better. The research is clear that imposing increasingly harsh sentences is not an effective way to reduce gun crime. 404 Consider United States v. Rivera-Ruperto. 405 The defendant served as an armed guard during what were, unknown to him, sham

401 Beale, supra note 269, at 997.
403 Patton, supra note 293, at 1030 (“Federal gun possession prosecutions are particularly vulnerable to deterrence critiques because they do nothing to increase the perceived odds of detection (which remains almost entirely dependent on local police activity).”).
405 852 F.3d 1 (1st Cir. 2017).
drug deals orchestrated by the FBI to catch police corruption in Puerto Rico.\textsuperscript{406} In addition to the underlying drug charges, the government charged the defendant with violating § 924(c) for possessing the gun in furtherance of the drug trafficking crimes.\textsuperscript{407} The gun crimes created an enormous sentence, even though the defendant had no prior criminal record. “[O]f the combined 161 years and 10 months to which Rivera-Ruperto was sentenced, the lion’s share of the sentence—130 years to be exact—was the result of minimum sentences required by statute for Rivera-Ruperto’s six firearms convictions under 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)(1)(C).”\textsuperscript{408} The court rejected an Eighth Amendment challenge to the sentence.\textsuperscript{409} In an opinion concurring in the denial of rehearing en banc in the case, Judge Barron concluded:

Rivera faces the longest and most unforgiving possible prison sentence . . . . only because Congress has been deemed to have made a blanket judgment that even an offender like Rivera—who has no prior criminal record and whose series of related crimes resulted in no harm to an identifiable victim—should have no hope of ever living free. And he does so even though virtually every comparable jurisdiction punishes comparable criminal conduct less harshly, and even though the federal government itself punishes nearly the same or seemingly worse conduct more leniently.\textsuperscript{410}

Although Congress has prospectively fixed the type of sentencing calculation that led to Rivera’s lengthy sentence with the First Step Act, it left in place all of the mandatory minimum penalties for gun crimes and refused to cede discretion to judges to consider offender and offense circumstances.\textsuperscript{411}

2. Race- and Class-Based Inequities

Gun violence itself is a symptom of and driver of inequality. Black Americans are disproportionately victims of gun homicides; Black men constitute over half of victims, while only 6% of the population.\textsuperscript{412} The social

\textsuperscript{406} Id. at 4-5.
\textsuperscript{407} Id. at 5, 13.
\textsuperscript{408} Id. at 16-17.
\textsuperscript{409} See Id. at 18 ("The crime of possessing a firearm in furtherance of such a drug trafficking offense is a grave one, and Congress has made a legislative determination that it requires harsh punishment. Given the weight of the case law, we see no Eighth Amendment route for second-guessing that legislative judgment.").
\textsuperscript{410} United States v. Rivera-Ruperto, 884 F.3d 25, 48 (1st Cir. 2018) (Barron, J., concurring in the denial of rehearing en banc).
\textsuperscript{411} First Step Act of 2018, supra note 128.
and economic costs of gun violence are also visited disproportionately on poor and minority communities. Unfortunately, federal enforcement has not addressed inequality but instead exacerbates it.

This enforcement works to reinforce race and class-based hierarchies by using the blunt instrument of incarceration to counteract what are often other and deeper-rooted problems. As Benjamin Levin writes, the federal “criminal gun possession statutes exacerbate the pathologies identified in the context of the War on Drugs.” Thus, the federal felon-in-possession statute works by penalizing gun possession by persons already-convicted of drug, violent felony, and other offenses. We know that those inputs—who gets convicted and for what—are already the result of systematic practices that work against Black Americans. And if Black Americans are more likely to be charged with a crime than White Americans, then they are that much more likely both to get a gun-disqualifying conviction and to be the one with a gun-disqualifying conviction who gets caught unlawfully possessing a firearm. Further, as we have described, enforcement priorities can further exacerbate inequality by tending to remove local cases to federal courts where there are less diverse juries, harsher sentencing options, and less overall local political accountability.

As criticism has resulted in some efforts to address drug sentencing disparities and mandatory minimums, a similar movement has not occurred with the same urgency in regard to federal gun offenses. If anything, the trend toward increasing the number and severity of federal gun prosecutions has deepened over the past few years. In 2011, the U.S. Sentencing Commission made detailed recommendations to change the severity and mandatory nature of § 924(c) in several respects, but those proposals have not been followed to date except for the minor revisions we noted in the First Step Act. And
when prosecutorial leniency options expanded, even the Obama Administration made sure that guns were treated differently: “gun possession remained an exclusionary factor for the criteria announced by Attorney General Holder allowing prosecutors to charge below a mandatory minimum in certain drug cases.”

Thus, the problem of inequality in federal enforcement is two-fold: it visits extremely severe sentences on individuals, often only for tangentially firearm-related reasons, but it ignores the underlying causes of firearms violence, which disproportionately burdens underserved and minority communities. Changes in judicial interpretation of statutes, legislative efforts, and enforcement have not addressed this disconnect, and instead may have magnified it.

C. The Path Forward

What would a system look like that did not use guns as a proxy to impose severe sentences on individuals, often for non-gun-related reasons, but rather was designed primarily to reduce gun violence? We first look at what answers might come from within the criminal legal system and then how to expand outside that system.

1. Reforms Internal to the Criminal-Law Paradigm

While Congress responded to growing concerns regarding racial disparities in drug sentencing in the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 (focusing on cocaine sentencing and the crack/powder distinction), there has been only minimal effort in the area of firearms prosecution and sentencing. Yet, as Benjamin Levin has highlighted, “any criminal regulation of gun possession need not resemble ACCA, Project Exile, or the current web of mandatory minimum sentencing provisions.”

For one thing, even when it has substantially increased criminal liability or penalties, Congress has not always been especially deliberative about it. The Supreme Court itself has remarked on “Congress’ less-than-meticulous drafting” of certain firearms laws, noting that particular provisions have

---

419 Patton, supra note 293, at 1039.
421 Levin, supra note 35, at 2177-78, 2224 (“[D]espite Holder’s public criticism of mandatory minimum sentences in the drug context, little has been said about similar sentences for pure possessory offenses in the gun context.”).
been “the source of much perplexity in the courts” or that clarifying language was perhaps “an inadvertent casualty of a complex drafting process.” Sometimes it has chalked up “syntactical awkwardness” or “[p]artially overlapping provisions” to last minute changes to major pieces of legislation. More focus on the provisions might lead to more attention to their possible effects.

The research on those effects emphasizes the need for deterrence, but not by increasing sentences. Rather, there is strong evidence that likelihood of detection matters: predictable consequences for illegal firearms use are key. As Philip Cook and Jens Ludwig emphasize, public safety and public health are not incompatible goals. While lengthy federal sentences may not deter gun violence, at the same time, Cook and Ludwig point out that “the dismal clearance rates for shootings we have seen in recent years in the U.S. are a source of concern.” Community-based programs seek to provide early intervention to individuals, including behavioral health support, in order to reduce gun violence.

2. Reforms That Take Us Beyond the Criminal Law

Many of the patterns and pathologies of the current system bring us back to the question: why crime? Why has the criminal legal system been the prime way the federal government has conceptualized the problem of gun violence?

Firearms are ubiquitous in American society. Thirty percent of adults own a gun, and eleven percent more live with someone who does. Most recent estimates count more guns in civilian hands than people in the United States. Indeed, the FBI experienced record numbers of background checks

425 Hayes, 555 U.S. at 428.
428 Id. at 791.
429 AM. PSYCH. ASS’N, WHAT WORKS TO REDUCE GUN VIOLENCE (2014), https://www.apa.org/monitor/2014/02/gun-violence [https://perma.cc/C74K-6ZG8]; see also Vizzard, Current and Future Policy, supra note 34, at 904 (“Ceasefire projects would seem to offer more near-term hope for reducing violence than does the frustrated pursuit of new national gun laws.”).
in 2020, early in the COVID-19 pandemic, with over 3.7 million total in March, mostly for gun purchases. Guns can end up in the hands of those who cannot legally possess them. Guns can then be used as a proxy for solving other crimes and social problems; that is how § 924(c) and ACCA are structured: to serve as “umbrella” sentencing-enhancer offenses for other criminal charges. We see from legislative developments and enforcement data discussed in Parts I and II that guns have been used this way for drugs offenses, violent offenses, and now increasingly for immigration enforcement.

There is a large and growing body of research on the causes of gun violence, as well as the efficacy of programmatic approaches towards reducing gun violence. In response to community-wide drivers of violence, a different approach emerged by the late 1990s. It sought to respond not to individual incidents, but rather to conduct a Group Violence Intervention (GVI). The GVI included (1) public education targeting youth responsible for the bulk of gun violence with focused deterrence, to ensure predictable consequences for gun violence, (2) mobilizing community and faith leaders, and (3) providing social services. Scholars such as Anthony Braga and David Kennedy have researched and developed such programs, which, again, seek to better detect and deter more broadly, as well as engage the community—and not primarily operating through sentencing enhancements.

Following early success in Boston, under Operation Ceasefire, the model has been adopted in a wide range of jurisdictions.

That collaborative, deterrence, prevention, and community-centered approach is very much unlike the principal approach of federal prosecutors—which involves collaboration—but is largely focused on severe sentencing. To be sure, community-based pilot programs to combat firearms violence have been funded by federal grants. A hospital-based risk prevention program, for

---


433 See, e.g., Drury D. Stevenson, *Gun Violence as an Obstacle to Educational Equality*, 50 U. MEMPHIS L. REV. 1091, 1132, 1135-36 (describing community-based programs like Cure Violence that seek to change the culture around firearms).


example, has been endorsed by the Department of Justice.\footnote{436 U.S.
Dep’t of Just., Defending Childhood: Report of the Attorney General’s National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence 87 (2012), https://www.justice.gov/defendingchildhood/cev-rpt-full.pdf [https://perma.cc/MK8E-VDE6].} The Office of Justice Programs, which conducts crime research for the Department of Justice, has evaluated Group Violence Initiative efforts to reduce gun violence.\footnote{437 Congress has funded Group Violence Initiative programs, but it awarded a fraction of what the White House had requested, with the result that cities have had applications rejected by the DOJ.\footnote{438 Other local strategies can focus on disrupting the illegal gun sales that are associated with gun violence.\footnote{439 To date, federal law has not played a major role in such efforts, but the Biden Administration’s new push may change that.\footnote{440 We note that state lawmakers are not constrained by the same jurisdictional limits as the federal government and can more directly target violent crime.\footnote{441 That said, state lawmakers are not uninterested in regulating firearms use during crime. Use of a firearm is often an enhancement, including in sentencing; and it can, for example, mean the difference between first- and second-degree murder.\footnote{442 Increasingly, however, state lawmaking—at least in many states—is focused on a gun violence prevention approach that does not rely upon severe sentencing. As Joseph Blocher and Jacob Charles write, “Extreme risk protection order (“ERPO”) laws—often called ‘red flag’ laws—permit the denial of firearms to individuals who a judge has determined present an imminent risk of harm to themselves or others.”\footnote{443 These laws, then, provide a more particularized approach regarding categories of individuals. Their focus is not primarily on criminal sentencing, and indeed, the focus is not criminal at all: it is a civil order removing the firearm from an individual who has been determined to be a threat to himself.

442 Intervention Strategies, supra note 435.}

443 See Philip J. Cook, Gun Markets, 1 ANN. REV. CRIM. 359, 373-74 (2018) (positing that certain regulation of transaction patterns, including expanding the categories of people disqualified from owning guns, can save lives).


445 United States v. Morrison, 529 U.S. 598, 618 n.8 (2000) (noting that, unlike the federal government’s limited powers, the Constitution reserves “a generalized police power to the States”).

446 See, e.g., N.C. GEN STAT., § 14-17(a) (defining first-degree murder as any murder that involves the use of a “deadly weapon”).

or others. However, these laws are often accompanied by criminal provisions regarding violation of a red flag order, often relying upon relatively minor fines and penalties.

Many cities have also recently begun to establish and fund governmental offices of violence prevention to target the systematic and underlying concerns that lead to gun violence, often seeking solutions through non-carceral means. Similar types of community-based outreach efforts and public education campaigns about the harms of the current harsh sentencing regime may help make headway in the battle over norms and discourse.

As the American Psychological Association explains, “[r]educing the incidence of gun violence will require interventions through multiple systems, including legal, public health, public safety, community, and health.” It is not a problem that harsher sentences can be expected to solve.

CONCLUSION

In this Article, we explore the evolution of the surprising range of federal gun crimes, detailing the substance of and major amendments to each of the primary criminal statutes. They cover conduct ranging from gun distribution, possession of particular weapons such as machine guns, use by drug traffickers, and individual possession of guns by felons.

Second, we describe how, in practice, federal prosecutors adapted their approach to focus on certain core gun crimes over time. Enacting a universal federal crime of gun possession during commission of any crime was (barely)

444 Id. at 1317 (establishing that extreme risk laws are civil proceedings with no criminal sanctions).

445 See, e.g., WIS. STAT. § 813.121(8)(a) (2020) (“Whoever knowingly violates a temporary restraining order or injunction issued under sub. (3) or (4) shall be fined not more than $10,000 or imprisoned for not more than 9 months or both.”); see also FLA. STAT. § 741.309(3)(a) (2021) (permitted the use of civil or criminal contempt proceedings to address domestic violence injunction violations). Other such laws do not include criminal provisions. E.g., COLO. REV. STAT. § 13-14.5-103(6)(g) (2021) (requiring subjects of temporary extreme risk protection orders to refrain from having a firearm in their possession while the order is in effect). For an overview, see Extreme Risk Protection Orders, GIFFORDS L. CTR., https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/who-can-have-a-gun/extreme-risk-protection-orders [https://perma.cc/V8KY-CNHW].

446 See Violence Prevention, MILWAUKEE HEALTH DEPT., https://city.milwaukee.gov/health/staysafe [https://perma.cc/64FV-PUZU] (describing how the office “provides strategic direction and oversight for City efforts to reduce risk of violence through linked strategies in partnership with government, non-profit, neighborhood, and faith organizations”); Press Release, Mayor’s Office to Prevent Gun Violence Set to Expand, Launch Major Peacekeeping Programs (July 10, 2018), https://www1.nyc.gov/site/peacenyc/index.page [https://perma.cc/65BV-U7T6] (identifying the Office to Prevent Gun Violence’s goals as working “to coordinate the city’s various anti-gun violence initiatives, amplify community-based intervention and prevention services, and introduce technological solutions to prevent gun violence to create safe, empowered and interconnected communities in New York City”).

rejected by Congress after the judiciary raised alarm bells concerning federalism and docket congestion. Nor has a more cooperative federalism approach worked in the background-check setting, where financial incentives and penalties provide more indirect means to carry out federal priorities. Instead, the middle course—relying on a powerful felon-in-possession statute in close collaboration with state and local prosecutors—has promoted the federal interest in imposing severe penalties in firearms cases. Most recently, such efforts have also become prominent in immigration prosecutions.

Third, this expanded statutory and enforcement regime has provided vehicles for constitutional litigation testing the reach of federal criminal jurisdiction, use of federal crimes as sentencing enhancements, and boundaries between federal, state, and local enforcement. And yet that litigation has not meaningfully hampered enforcement. At best, constitutional rulings have channeled enforcement, including in ways that may have magnified inequities.

We argue that federal gun crimes are not just a microcosm of larger federal priorities regarding gun regulation or criminal prosecution priorities. Rather, they have their own logic. We have described how three factors dominate: (1) aggressive interest-group lobbying that ends in legislative compromise on harsh punishment; (2) judges and lawmakers dichotomize guns, contrasting their possession by “law-abiding citizens” with that of “thugs” and “gangsters”; and (3) prosecutorial power that is magnified in this area due to the ubiquity of firearms in communities and in criminal activity in the United States, together with federal prosecutors’ ability to leverage sentencing to obtain favorable plea bargains.

In few other areas is there such intensive lobbying on both sides when criminal statutes are enacted. Federal gun crimes reflect a unique dynamic in which legislation is shaped by aggressive lobbying by interest groups, the special resources and discretion of federal prosecutors, and the ubiquity of firearms in communities and in criminal activity in the United States. Federal firearms crimes should be understood as central to federal prosecution, just as the fraud and drug statutes have long been. With powerful forces arrayed on both sides, by the 1980s, statutes reflected a settlement: regulation of the manufacture and distribution of firearms was limited, while increasingly severe criminal penalties for individuals continued to expand in their reach. Those penalties in turn empowered prosecutors seeking leverage in plea bargaining.

As a result, gun crimes represent a special story in federal criminal law, in which prosecutors, Congress, and interest groups have remained very much aligned. From a criminal law perspective, then, federal gun law looks quite unified and consistent, with an extensive focus on punishing individuals in order to target a wide range of criminal conduct—ranging from primarily to
only tangentially gun-related. The result magnifies inequality in sentencing outcomes, often in cases having little connection to gun violence, while ignoring underlying causes of gun violence. The federal government has supported non-carceral gun violence prevention programs, but to a limited extent. The powerful political and institutional forces that fixed felon-in-possession prosecution as a cornerstone of federal law and prosecution strategy continue to occupy the field.

The trajectory of federal gun crimes has been clear. Whether the federal approach will arc towards a more grounded approach remains to be seen. A new direction is apparent in the states, where the recent focus has been on non-criminal red flag laws, other restrictions on gun possession and purchasing, as well as community programs focused on deterrence and prevention.448 Thus, while coherent from a political economy perspective, from a policy perspective, federal gun crime does not achieve a federal, systematic, non-discriminatory, and collaborative effort to address the deep American problem of gun violence.

448 For a further summary of these gun violence intervention strategies, see Intervention Strategies, supra note 435.
APPENDIX: STATUTORY CHANGES TO 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)

Underlined text = additions  
Strikethrough text = deletions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Act</th>
<th>Modifications to Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1968—Pub. L. 90-618 § 102 | (c) Whoever—  
(1) uses a firearm to commit any felony which may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, or  
(2) carries a firearm unlawfully during the commission of any felony which may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, shall be sentenced to a term of imprisonment for not less than one year nor more than 10 years. In the case of his second or subsequent conviction under this subsection, such person shall be sentenced to a term of imprisonment for not less than five years nor more than 25 years, and, notwithstanding any other provision of law, the court shall not suspend the sentence of such person or give him a probationary sentence. |
| 1971—Pub. L. 91-644 | (c) Whoever—  
(1) uses a firearm to commit any felony for which he may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, or  
(2) carries a firearm unlawfully during the commission of any felony for which he may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for the commission of such felony, be sentenced to a term of imprisonment for not less than one year nor more than 10 years. In the case of his second or subsequent conviction under this subsection, such person shall be sentenced to a term of imprisonment for not less than five years nor more than 25 years, and, notwithstanding any other provision of law, the court shall not suspend the sentence in the case of a second or subsequent conviction of such person or give him a probationary sentence, nor shall the term of imprisonment imposed under this subsection run concurrently with any term of imprisonment imposed for the commission of such felony. |
| 1984—Pub. L. 98-473, § 1005(a) | (c) Whoever, during and in relation to any crime of violence, including a crime of violence which provides for enhanced punishment if committed by the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or device, for which he may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, uses or carries a firearm,  
(1) uses a firearm to commit any felony for which he may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, or  
(2) carries a firearm unlawfully during the commission of any felony for which he may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for such crime of violence, be sentenced to a term... |
of imprisonment for not less than one
five years nor more than
ten years. In the case of his second or subsequent conviction under this subsection, such person shall be sentenced to a term of imprisonment for not less than two
 ten years, nor more than twenty-five years, and, in Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the court shall not place on probation or suspend the sentence in the case of a second or subsequent conviction of such any person convicted of a violation of this subsection or give him a probationary sentence, nor shall the term of imprisonment imposed under this subsection run concurrently with any other term of imprisonment imposed including that imposed for the commission of such felony crime of violence in which the firearm was used or carried. No person sentenced under this subsection shall be eligible for parole during the term of imprisonment imposed herein.

1986—Pub. L. 99–308, § 104(a)(2)

Firearm Owners Protection Act

(c)(i) Whoever, during and in relation to any crime of violence or drug trafficking crime, including a crime of violence or drug trafficking crime, which provides for enhanced punishment if committed by the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or device, for which he may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, uses or carries a firearm, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for such crime of violence or drug trafficking crime, be sentenced to imprisonment for five years, and if the firearm is a machinegun, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, to imprisonment for ten years. In the case of his second or subsequent conviction under this subsection, such person shall be sentenced to imprisonment for ten years, and if the firearm is a machinegun, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, to imprisonment for twenty years. Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the court shall not place on probation or suspend the sentence of any person convicted of a violation of this subsection, nor shall the term of imprisonment imposed under this subsection run concurrently with any other term of imprisonment imposed including that imposed for the crime of violence or drug trafficking crime, or drug trafficking crime in which the firearm was used or carried. No person sentenced under this subsection shall be eligible for parole during the term of imprisonment imposed herein.

(2) For purposes of this subsection, the term 'drug trafficking crime' means any felony violation of Federal law involving the distribution, manufacture, or importation of any controlled substance (as defined in section 102 of the Controlled Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 802)).
(2) For purposes of this subsection the term ‘crime of violence’ means an offense that is a felony and—
(A) has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against the person or property of another, or
(B) that by its nature, involves a substantial risk that physical force against the person or property of another may be used in the course of committing the offense.

1988—Pub. L. 100–690, §§ 6212, 6460, 7060

Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988

(c)(1) Whoever, during and in relation to any crime of violence or drug trafficking crime, including a crime of violence or drug trafficking crime, which provides for enhanced punishment if committed by the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or device, for which he may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, uses or carries a firearm, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for such crime of violence or drug trafficking crime, be sentenced to imprisonment for five years, and if the firearm is a machinegun, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, to imprisonment for ten thirty years. In the case of his second or subsequent conviction under this subsection, such person shall be sentenced to imprisonment for ten twenty years, and if the firearm is a machinegun, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, to imprisonment for twenty years life imprisonment without release. Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the court shall not place on probation or suspend the sentence of any person convicted of a violation of this subsection, nor shall the term of imprisonment imposed under this subsection run concurrently with any other term of imprisonment imposed including that imposed for the crime of violence or drug trafficking crime, or drug trafficking crime in which the firearm was used or carried. No person sentenced under this subsection shall be eligible for parole during the term of imprisonment imposed herein.

(2) For purposes of this subsection, the term ‘drug trafficking crime’ means any felony punishable under the Controlled Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 801 et seq.), the Controlled Substances Import and Export Act (21 U.S.C. 951 et seq.), or the Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act (46 U.S.C. App. 1901 et seq.) violation of Federal law involving the distribution, manufacture, or importation of any controlled substance (as defined in section 102 of the Controlled Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 802)).

(3) For purposes of this subsection the term ‘crime of violence’ means an offense that is a felony and—
(A) has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against the person or property of another, or
(B) that by its nature, involves a substantial risk that physical force against the person or property of another may be used in the course of committing the offense.


(c)(i) Whoever, during and in relation to any crime of violence or drug trafficking crime (including a crime of violence or drug trafficking crime which provides for enhanced punishment if committed by the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or device) for which he may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, uses or carries a firearm, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for such crime of violence or drug trafficking crime, be sentenced to imprisonment for five years, and if the firearm is a short-barreled rifle, short-barreled shotgun, to imprisonment for ten years, and if the firearm is a machinegun, or destructive device, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, to imprisonment for thirty years. In the case of his second or subsequent conviction under this subsection, such person shall be sentenced to imprisonment for twenty years, and if the firearm is a machinegun, or destructive device, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, to imprisonment for life imprisonment without release. Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the court shall not place on probation or suspend the sentence of any person convicted of a violation of this subsection, nor shall the term of imprisonment imposed under this subsection run concurrently with any other term of imprisonment imposed including that imposed for the crime of violence or drug trafficking crime in which the firearm was used or carried. No person sentenced under this subsection shall be eligible for parole during the term of imprisonment imposed herein.

(2) For purposes of this subsection, the term ‘drug trafficking crime’ means any felony any felony punishable under the Controlled Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 801 et seq.), the Controlled Substances Import and Export Act (21 U.S.C. 951 et seq.), or the Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act (46 U.S.C. App. 1901 et seq.).

(3) For purposes of this subsection the term ‘crime of violence’ means an offense that is a felony and—
(A) has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against the person or property of another, or
(B) that by its nature, involves a substantial risk that physical force against the person or property of another may be used in the course of committing the offense.

| Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 |
| (c)(1) Whoever, during and in relation to any crime of violence or drug trafficking crime (including a crime of violence or drug trafficking crime which provides for enhanced punishment if committed by the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or device) for which he may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, uses or carries a firearm, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for such crime of violence or drug trafficking crime, be sentenced to imprisonment for five years, and if the firearm is a short-barreled rifle, short-barreled shotgun, or semiautomatic assault weapon, to imprisonment for ten years, and if the firearm is a machinegun, or destructive device, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, to imprisonment for thirty years. In the case of his second or subsequent conviction under this subsection, such person shall be sentenced to imprisonment for twenty years, and if the firearm is a machinegun, or destructive device, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, to life imprisonment without release. Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the court shall not place on probation or suspend the sentence of any person convicted of a violation of this subsection, nor shall the term of imprisonment imposed under this subsection run concurrently with any other term of imprisonment imposed including that imposed for the crime of violence or drug trafficking crime in which the firearm was used or carried. No person sentenced under this subsection shall be eligible for parole during the term of imprisonment imposed herein. |

(2) For purposes of this subsection, the term 'drug trafficking crime' means any felony any felony punishable under the Controlled Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 801 et seq.), the Controlled Substances Import and Export Act (21 U.S.C. 951 et seq.), or the Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act (46 U.S.C. App. 1901 et seq.).

(3) For purposes of this subsection the term 'crime of violence' means an offense that is a felony and—
(A) has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against the person or property of another, or
(B) that by its nature, involves a substantial risk that physical force against the person or property of another may be used in the course of committing the offense.
Except to the extent that a greater minimum sentence is otherwise provided by this subsection or by any other provision of law, whoever any person who, during and in relation to any crime of violence or drug trafficking crime (including a crime of violence or drug trafficking crime which that provides for an enhanced punishment if committed by the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or device) for which he, the person may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, uses or carries a firearm, or who, in furtherance of any such crime, possesses a firearm, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for such crime of violence or drug trafficking crime—

(i) be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than five years;

(ii) if the firearm is brandished, be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than seven years; and

(iii) if the firearm is discharged, be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than ten years.

(B) and if the firearm possessed by a person convicted of a violation of this subsection—

(i) is a short-barreled rifle, short-barreled shotgun, or semiautomatic assault weapon, the person shall be sentenced to a term of imprisonment for of not less than ten years; or

(ii) and if the firearm is a machinegun, or destructive device, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, the person shall be sentenced to a term of imprisonment for of not less than thirty years.

(C) In the case of his a second or subsequent conviction under this subsection, such the person shall—

(i) be sentenced to a term of imprisonment for of not less than twenty years; and

(ii) if the firearm involved is a machinegun, or a destructive device, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, be sentenced to life imprisonment for life without release.

(D) Notwithstanding any other provision of law—

(i) the court shall not place on probation or suspend the sentence of any person convicted of a violation of this subsection; and

(ii) no term of imprisonment imposed on a person under this subsection run concurrently with any other term of imprisonment imposed on the person, including that any term of imprisonment imposed for the crime of violence or drug trafficking crime in during which the firearm was used, or carried, or possessed.
(2) For purposes of this subsection, the term ‘drug trafficking crime’ means any felony any felony punishable under the Controlled Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 801 et seq.), the Controlled Substances Import and Export Act (21 U.S.C. 951 et seq.), or the Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act (46 U.S.C. App. 1901 et seq.).

(3) For purposes of this subsection the term ‘crime of violence’ means an offense that is a felony and—
(A) has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against the person or property of another, or
(B) that by its nature, involves a substantial risk that physical force against the person or property of another may be used in the course of committing the offense.

(4) For purposes of this subsection, the term ‘brandish’ means, with respect to a firearm, to display all or part of the firearm, or otherwise make the presence of the firearm known to another person, in order to intimidate that person, regardless of whether the firearm is directly visible to that person.

Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act

(c)(i)(A) Except to the extent that a greater minimum sentence is otherwise provided by this subsection or by any other provision of law, any person who, during and in relation to any crime of violence or drug trafficking crime (including a crime of violence or drug trafficking crime that provides for an enhanced punishment if committed by the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or device) for which the person may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, uses or carries a firearm, or who, in furtherance of any such crime, possesses a firearm, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for such crime of violence or drug trafficking crime—
(i) be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 5 years; or
(ii) if the firearm is brandished, be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 7 years; and
(iii) if the firearm is discharged, be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 10 years.
(B) If the firearm possessed by a person convicted of a violation of this subsection—
(i) is a short-barreled rifle, short-barreled shotgun, or semiautomatic assault weapon, the person shall be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 10 years; or
(ii) is a machinegun or destructive device, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, the person shall be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 30 years.
(C) In the case of a second or subsequent conviction under this subsection, the person shall—
(i) be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 25 years; and
(ii) if the firearm involved is a machinegun or a destructive device, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, be sentenced to imprisonment for life.
(D) Notwithstanding any other provision of law—
(i) a court shall not place on probation any person convicted of a violation of this subsection; and
(ii) no term of imprisonment imposed on a person under this subsection run concurrently with any other term of imprisonment imposed on the person, including any term of imprisonment imposed for the crime of violence or drug trafficking crime during which the firearm was used, carried, or possessed.

(2) For purposes of this subsection, the term 'drug trafficking crime' means any felony any felony punishable under the Controlled Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 801 et seq.), the Controlled Substances Import and Export Act (21 U.S.C. 951 et seq.), or the Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act (46 U.S.C. App. 1901 et seq.).

(3) For purposes of this subsection the term 'crime of violence' means an offense that is a felony and—
(A) has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against the person or property of another, or
(B) that by its nature, involves a substantial risk that physical force against the person or property of another may be used in the course of committing the offense.

(4) For purposes of this subsection, the term 'brandish' means, with respect to a firearm, to display all or part of the firearm, or otherwise make the presence of the firearm known to another person, in order to intimidate that person, regardless of whether the firearm is directly visible to that person.

(5) Except to the extent that a greater minimum sentence is otherwise provided under this subsection, or by any other provision of law, any person who, during and in relation to any crime of violence or drug trafficking crime (including a crime of violence or drug trafficking crime that provides for an enhanced punishment if committed by the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or device) for which the person may be prosecuted in a
court of the United States, uses or carries armor piercing ammunition, or who, in furtherance of any such crime, possesses armor piercing ammunition, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for such crime of violence or drug trafficking crime or conviction under this section—

(A) be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 15 years; and

(B) if death results from the use of such ammunition—

(i) if the killing is murder (as defined in section 1111), be punished by death or sentenced to a term of imprisonment for any term of years or for life; and

(ii) if the killing is manslaughter (as defined in section 1112), be punished as provided in section 1112.

2006—Pub. L. 109–304, § 17

c(i)(A) Except to the extent that a greater minimum sentence is otherwise provided by this subsection or by any other provision of law, any person who, during and in relation to any crime of violence or drug trafficking crime (including a crime of violence or drug trafficking crime that provides for an enhanced punishment if committed by the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or device) for which the person may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, uses or carries a firearm, or who, in furtherance of any such crime, possesses a firearm, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for such crime of violence or drug trafficking crime—

(i) be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 5 years; (ii) if the firearm is brandished, be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 7 years; and (iii) if the firearm is discharged, be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 10 years.

(B) If the firearm possessed by a person convicted of a violation of this subsection—

(i) is a short-barreled rifle, short-barreled shotgun, or semiautomatic assault weapon, the person shall be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 10 years; or

(ii) is a machinegun or destructive device, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, the person shall be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 30 years.

(C) In the case of a second or subsequent conviction under this subsection, the person shall—

(i) be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 25 years; and

(ii) if the firearm involved is a machinegun or a destructive device, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, be sentenced to imprisonment for life.

(D) Notwithstanding any other provision of law—
(i) a court shall not place on probation any person convicted of a violation of this subsection; and 
(ii) no term of imprisonment imposed on a person under this subsection run concurrently with any other term of imprisonment imposed on the person, including any term of imprisonment imposed for the crime of violence or drug trafficking crime during which the firearm was used, carried, or possessed.

(2) For purposes of this subsection, the term 'drug trafficking crime' means any felony any felony punishable under the Controlled Substances Act (21 U.S.C. § 801 et seq.), the Controlled Substances Import and Export Act (21 U.S.C. § 951 et seq.), or chapter 705 of title 46 the Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act (46 U.S.C. App. § 1901 et seq.).

(3) For purposes of this subsection the term 'crime of violence' means an offense that is a felony and—
(A) has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against the person or property of another, or 
(B) that by its nature, involves a substantial risk that physical force against the person or property of another may be used in the course of committing the offense.

(4) For purposes of this subsection, the term 'brandish' means, with respect to a firearm, to display all or part of the firearm, or otherwise make the presence of the firearm known to another person, in order to intimidate that person, regardless of whether the firearm is directly visible to that person.

(5) Except to the extent that a greater minimum sentence is otherwise provided under this subsection, or by any other provision of law, any person who, during and in relation to any crime of violence or drug trafficking crime (including a crime of violence or drug trafficking crime that provides for an enhanced punishment if committed by the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or device) for which the person may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, uses or carries armor piercing ammunition, or who, in furtherance of any such crime, possesses armor piercing ammunition, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for such crime of violence or drug trafficking crime or conviction under this section—
(A) be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 15 years; and 
(B) if death results from the use of such ammunition—
(i) if the killing is murder (as defined in section 1111), be punished by death or sentenced to a term of imprisonment for any term of years or for life; and
(ii) if the killing is manslaughter (as defined in section 1112), be punished as provided in section 1112.

2018—Pub. L. 115–391, § 493

First Step Act of 2018

| (c) | (i)(A) Except to the extent that a greater minimum sentence is otherwise provided by this subsection or by any other provision of law, any person who, during and in relation to any crime of violence or drug trafficking crime (including a crime of violence or drug trafficking crime that provides for an enhanced punishment if committed by the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or device) for which the person may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, uses or carries a firearm, or who, in furtherance of any such crime, possesses a firearm, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for such crime of violence or drug trafficking crime—

(i) be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 5 years;

(ii) if the firearm is brandished, be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 7 years; and

(iii) if the firearm is discharged, be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 10 years.

(B) If the firearm possessed by a person convicted of a violation of this subsection—

(i) is a short-barreled rifle, short-barreled shotgun, or semiautomatic assault weapon, the person shall be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 10 years; or

(ii) is a machinegun or destructive device, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, the person shall be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 30 years.

(C) In the case of a second or subsequent conviction under this subsection violation of this subsection that occurs after a prior conviction under this subsection has become final, the person shall—

(i) be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 25 years; and

(ii) if the firearm involved is a machinegun or a destructive device, or is equipped with a firearm silencer or firearm muffler, be sentenced to imprisonment for life.

(D) Notwithstanding any other provision of law—

(i) a court shall not place on probation any person convicted of a violation of this subsection; and

(ii) no term of imprisonment imposed on a person under this subsection run concurrently with any other term of imprisonment imposed on the person, including any term of imprisonment imposed for the crime of violence or drug trafficking crime during which the firearm was used, carried, or possessed.
(2) For purposes of this subsection, the term 'drug trafficking crime' means any felony punishable under the Controlled Substances Act (21 U.S.C. 801 et seq.), the Controlled Substances Import and Export Act (21 U.S.C. 951 et seq.), or chapter 705 of title 46.

(3) For purposes of this subsection the term 'crime of violence' means an offense that is a felony and—
(A) has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against the person or property of another, or
(B) that by its nature, involves a substantial risk that physical force against the person or property of another may be used in the course of committing the offense.

(4) For purposes of this subsection, the term 'brandish' means, with respect to a firearm, to display all or part of the firearm, or otherwise make the presence of the firearm known to another person, in order to intimidate that person, regardless of whether the firearm is directly visible to that person.

(5) Except to the extent that a greater minimum sentence is otherwise provided under this subsection, or by any other provision of law, any person who, during and in relation to any crime of violence or drug trafficking crime (including a crime of violence or drug trafficking crime that provides for an enhanced punishment if committed by the use of a deadly or dangerous weapon or device) for which the person may be prosecuted in a court of the United States, uses or carries armor piercing ammunition, or who, in furtherance of any such crime, possesses armor piercing ammunition, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for such crime of violence or drug trafficking crime or conviction under this section—
(A) be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 15 years; and
(B) if death results from the use of such ammunition—
(i) if the killing is murder (as defined in section 1111), be punished by death or sentenced to a term of imprisonment for any term of years or for life; and
(ii) if the killing is manslaughter (as defined in section 1112), be punished as provided in section 1112.