

5 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GHOST GUNS

The term ‘ghost guns’—derived from the fact that these firearms are un-serialized, difficult to trace, and often remain invisible to the tracking and regulation covering traditionally manufactured firearms—refers to a wide range of homemade or improvised firearms. Assembled from parts, including those developed via 3D-printing technology, or from kits that include unfinished pieces (typically the receiver of the gun), ghost guns require the purchaser to be proficient in only basic machining to make the gun functional. Current federal firearms regulations do not require manufacturers of these parts or unfinished pieces or those assembling them to include serial numbers because the unassembled parts are not considered firearms. Thus, ghost gun parts and kits can be purchased online without being subject to most firearm regulations. Ghost guns present unique challenges to law enforcement agencies and make traditional investigative techniques less effective.

Concerns about the public safety risks posed by ghost guns is increasing. The ease of transforming ghost gun parts and kits into functional firearms and without having to go through background checks has made these firearms more accessible and likely more prevalent. Moreover, because these kits are not currently regulated under federal law, purchasers are not required to submit to a background check for the parts or the finished firearm.

As discussions about ghost guns, their regulation, and concerns for public safety migrate to the public sphere, here are five facts to help navigate the conversation.



1

Ghost guns can be assembled from parts or 3D-printed

Although ghost guns can be produced through a variety of formats, most relevant to public safety are those produced by ‘80% kits’ or via 3D-printing. An 80% kit includes the unassembled set of the components of a functioning firearm—generally, lower receivers with an unmachined fire-control cavity area and no holes or dents for the selector, trigger, or hammer pins. The nearly complete frame (or receiver) included in the kits, or sold separately, is the key component for building a ghost gun.

3D-printed ghost guns are those assembled from components manufactured with a 3D printer. This type of ghost gun can range from those made from a single 3D-printed part, such as a 3D-printed receiver, to those made almost entirely on a 3D-printer.

2

Ghost guns can be assembled rapidly and in large quantities, creating new avenues for gun trafficking schemes and networks

Ghost gun components allow individuals and groups to quickly produce high-quality firearms in large quantities. Because production is so easy, ghost guns have given rise to illegal firearm manufacturing rings that can produce untraceable hand and long guns. The barrier to entry is low; production of ghost guns requires few specialized tools and little technical skill.

3

Ghost guns make it difficult or ineffective to develop investigative leads or conduct firearms tracing

Ghost guns lack serial numbers and other identifiers commonly used during the investigative process. Traditional approaches to tracing firearm manufacture, sale, purchase, and transfers are considerably hampered by the unserialized and decentralized production method of ghost guns. This has the potential to increase investigative time and to reduce investigative effectiveness.

4

The number of crime-involved ghost guns increased substantially in 2020 for many agencies

The National Police Foundation conducted an [assessment](#) of law enforcement agencies’ experience with and response to ghost guns. This research—conducted with two dozen agencies around the U.S.—found an uptick in ghost gun recoveries in 2020 for the majority of agencies. For example, between 2019 and 2020, recoveries by the Philadelphia and San Diego Police Departments increased by 163% and 172%, respectively. Similarly, Prince George County’s (MD) Police Department saw a ghost gun recovery increase of 252% between 2019 and 2020.

5

Recovered ghost guns should be identified as such and should be processed to the fullest extent possible

NPF research also identified inconsistencies in how agencies identify, track, and report ghost guns. These inconsistencies make a comprehensive understanding of ghost gun prevalence and impact, at a national level difficult. Agencies should be provided the appropriate resources, training, and guidance for how to identify, process, and record ghost gun recoveries. This should include a larger emphasis on cohesive national reporting standards.

The National Police Foundation (NPF) is the oldest nationally-known, non-profit, non-partisan, and non-membership-driven organization dedicated to improving America’s most noble profession – policing. NPF has been on the cutting edge of police innovation for 50 years since it was established by the Ford Foundation as a result of the President’s Commission on the Challenge of Crime in a Free Society.