CALIFORNIA: STRONG GUN LAWS SAVE LIVES

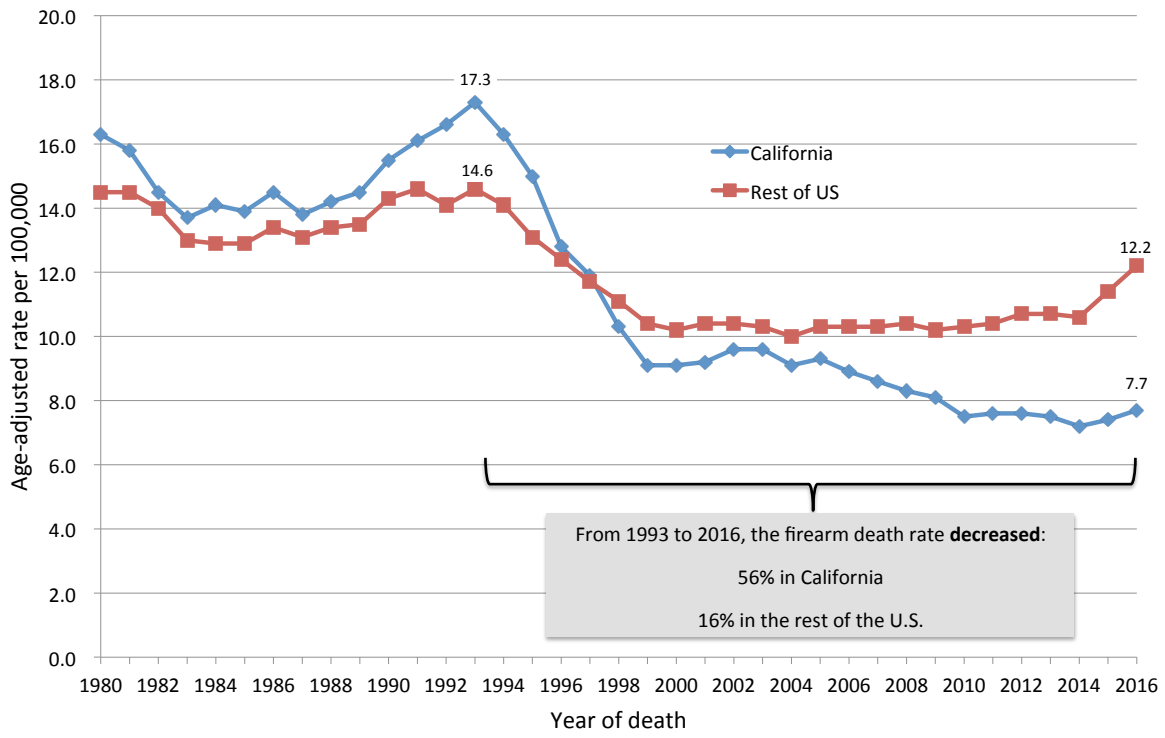
Trends in California Firearm Mortality Compared to the Rest of the U.S.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, California's firearm mortality rate was consistently higher than in the rest of the U.S. The state responded by enacting the strongest gun laws in the country. (See the overview of California firearm laws below.)

To help evaluate the impact of California's firearm laws, this report compares firearm mortality rates in California with those in the rest of the U.S. from 1980 through 2016 (the most recent data available).

In California and the rest of the U.S., firearm-related mortality rates peaked in 1993. As California's strong firearm laws took effect, the firearm mortality rate in California began a steep decline, decreasing 56% from 1993 to 2016. In the rest of the U.S., the rate declined more slowly. **By 2016, the firearm mortality rate in California was substantially lower than the rate in the rest of the country.**

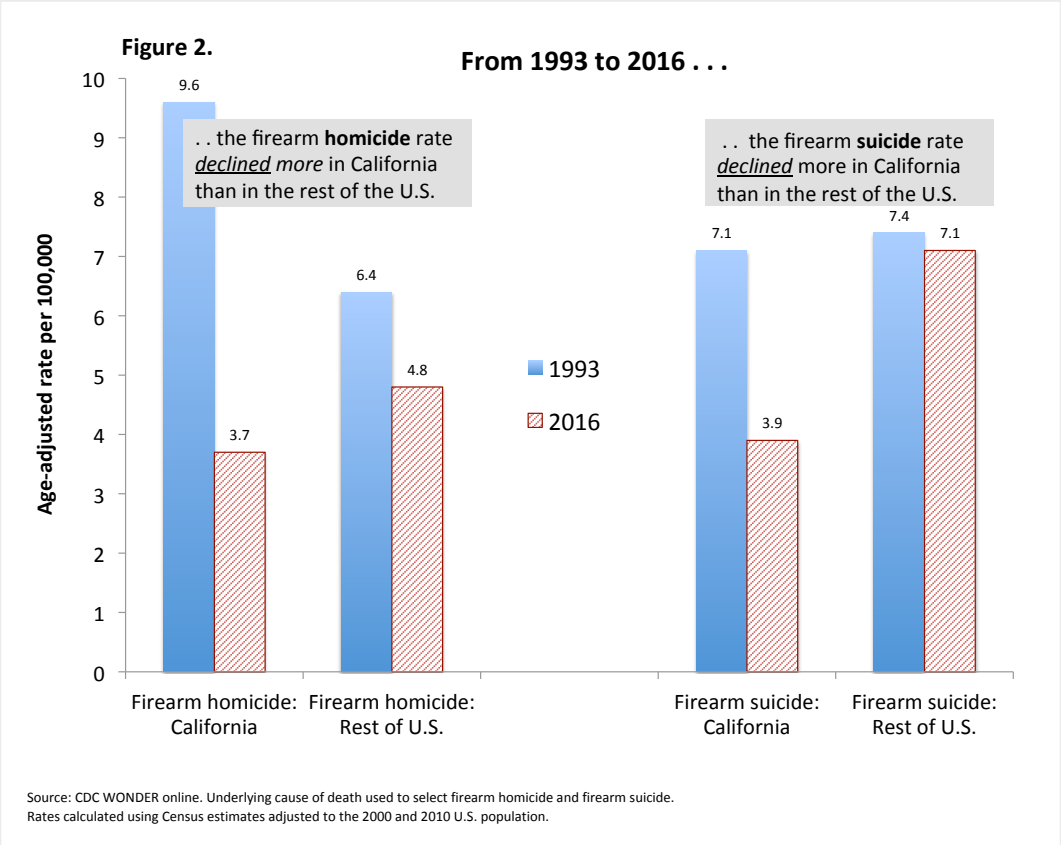
Figure 1. Firearm deaths in California compared to the rest of the U.S.
(legal intervention excluded)



Source: CDC WONDER online. Underlying cause of death used to select firearm deaths: homicide, suicide, unintentional, undetermined. Rates calculated using Census estimates adjusted to the 2000 and 2010 U.S. population.

Firearm mortality rates rose in 2015 and 2016. California's increases were less than those in the rest of the U.S.

The remainder of this report focuses on the time period from the peak rates of 1993 through 2016. Table 1 shows the number of death in California and the rest of the U.S.



California has done the best job in the country of enacting laws that make it harder for criminals and other dangerous people to acquire dangerous firearms. These laws helped reduce both gun homicides and gun suicides and enabled law enforcement to combat illegal firearms trafficking and seize illegally owned guns.

Table 1. Firearm deaths: number (and rate) in California and the rest of the U.S., 1993 and 2016

	All firearm deaths (excluding legal intervention)		Firearm homicide		Firearm suicide	
	California	Rest of U.S.	California	Rest of U.S.	California	Rest of U.S.
Year of death	# of deaths (Rate*)	# of deaths (Rate*)	# of deaths (Rate*)	# of deaths (Rate*)	# of deaths (Rate*)	# of deaths (Rate*)
1993	**5,424** (17.3)	**33,853** (14.6)	**3,183** (9.6)	**15,070** (6.4)	**2,075** (7.1)	**16,865** (7.4)
2016	**3,110** (7.7)	**35,038** (12.2)	**1,467** (3.7)	**12,948** (4.8)	**1,595** (3.9)	**21,343** (7.1)

*Age-adjusted rate per 100,000 population.

Source: CDC WONDER online. Underlying cause of death used to select all firearm deaths (excluding legal intervention), firearm homicide, and firearm suicide for California residents and the rest of the U.S. excluding California.

However, more must be done to make our communities safe. **Many Californians are killed or seriously wounded with firearms each year, and California's gun death rate has begun to rise again, though the increase is far less than in the rest of the country.** The U.S. has the weakest firearm laws of any industrialized nation, and weak federal laws undermine California's stronger ones.

Gun violence destroys families and communities. We must all work together to keep dangerous weapons out of the hands of dangerous people. We are accomplishing this in California by enacting sensible gun laws that save lives.

Overview of California Firearm Laws

Illegal Gun Possession, Gun Trafficking and Gun Crimes

- Background checks are required for all gun sales/transfers, including private party sales.
- People buying firearms must wait ten-days before taking possession.
- The California Department of Justice (CalDOJ) maintains records of gun sales.
- Ammunition sellers must register and obtain a license. They will conduct background checks on ammunition buyers and transmit information on sales to the CalDOJ.
- Persons with certain mental health determinations, felons, and persons guilty of certain violent misdemeanors are prohibited from purchasing or possessing a gun.
- People convicted of misdemeanor hate crimes are prohibited from purchasing or possessing firearms for ten years.
- Law enforcement must provide the CalDOJ with data for tracing illegal or crime guns.
- Gun shows are well regulated. For example, background checks and waiting periods are required for all firearm sales. CalDOJ monitors the compliance of gun shows and vendors.
- Handgun purchases are limited to one per month in order to reduce gun trafficking.
- CalDOJ checks to see if "prohibited persons," such as those who have become felons, previously purchased a handgun. Guns illegally owned can be seized.
- Local law enforcement has discretion in issuing permits to carry concealed weapons.
- Law enforcement or immediate family members can seek a court order to temporarily prohibit a person who is a risk to himself or others from buying or possessing a firearm.
- Persons who self-manufacture or assemble a firearm must apply to CalDOJ for a unique serial number that must be permanently engraved or affixed on the firearm, and they must pass a background check.

Domestic Violence and Firearms

- Persons under a restraining order must relinquish firearms and may not purchase them.
- Police may temporarily seize guns at the scene of domestic violence incidents.
- Courts may prohibit firearms possession due to domestic violence, harassment or stalking.

Unsafe Firearms

- Handguns sold must pass a state safety test. CalDOJ maintains a roster of approved handguns.
- New pistol models must have chamber load indicators and magazine disconnect safeties.
- Purchase or transfer of rifles with military-style features that do not have fixed magazines is prohibited. Grandfathered assault weapons are strictly regulated and owners of "bullet button" guns must register them with CalDOJ.
- Possession of large capacity magazines is prohibited.

Gun Manufacturers and Dealers

- Gun manufacturers must have a state license, tight security on premises and must conduct background checks on employees.
- All gun sales must be conducted through a federally licensed firearms dealer who conducts a background check on the buyer.
- Gun dealers and manufacturers who sell/ship firearms must check the receiver's federal and state firearms license with the CalDOJ to prevent illegal transfers from out of state.
- Gun dealers must post warnings about the risks of firearms and information about state gun laws. The information must be affixed to firearms packaging. Safety Certificate test takers must acknowledge their obligation to sell/transfer firearms through a dealer.
- It is illegal to sell ammunition to persons prohibited from possessing firearms.

Children, Families, and Public Safety

- Gun buyers must first pass a written safety test, obtain a firearm safety certificate, and perform a safe handling demonstration. Proof of residency and thumbprint are required.
- Gun owners can be held criminally liable for child access and misuse of their guns.
- All firearms sold by dealers must include CalDOJ-approved locking devices designed to prevent children and unauthorized users from firing them.

See: California Brady Campaign: https://www.bradycampaign.org/CA

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