

# Firearm Crime in the San Diego Region Data Analysis from 2022

Research findings from the Criminal Justice Research Division as part of the Project Safe Neighborhoods program in collaboration with the Southern District of the U.S. Attorney's Office

December 2023

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# Introduction

In 2022, the SANDAG Criminal Justice Research Division began to track crimes that involve firearms around the region from law enforcement data maintained in the Automated Regional Justice Information System (ARJIS). These data include the number of homicides, robberies, and assaults that involve the use of firearms by jurisdiction and location; the number of arrests for firearm-related offenses by jurisdiction and location; and the number of calls for service (CFS) for shots-fired and other firearm-related offenses directly from local law enforcement agencies. Additionally, SANDAG has been conducting interviews with arrestees in local jails as part of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) project regarding access and use of firearms in crimes, including those known as “ghost guns.”<sup>1</sup>

This CJ Brief examines the issue of firearm-related crime, access to and use of firearms in crimes, and law enforcement’s response to firearm-related crime in the San Diego region.

This publication is possible thanks to the collaboration with the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of California (SDCA) and The Children’s Initiative (TCI) as part of the Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) program, a nationwide initiative that brings together federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement officials, prosecutors, community leaders, and other stakeholders to identify the most pressing violent crime problems in a community and develop comprehensive solutions to address them.<sup>2</sup>

## Highlights

- The region experienced a daily average of 26.1 firearm-related calls for service (CFS) in 2022.
- While the number of violent crimes increased in 2022, the proportion of those that involved the use of a firearm decreased from 17% in 2021 to 14% in 2022.
- Arrestees that used a firearm in committing a crime most often used it in robberies or drug deals.
- For the first time since 2019, 2022 saw a decrease in the number of ghost guns seized in the region.
- Arrestees that reported ever buying a ghost gun, all said it was “Easy” or “Very Easy” to obtain.
- Since 2019, there has been an increase in the percent of arrests for firearm-related offenses, while there has been an overall downward trend in total arrest numbers.

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<sup>1</sup> Ghost guns or Privately Made Firearms (PMFs) are firearms that are not serialized with a registration number. There are a few varieties of ghost guns that are in circulation. One type is built from a kit containing 80% of a completed gun (i.e., the gun’s lower receiver), but require a barrel and slide to be added to be fully assembled. Another variety of ghost gun is entirely 3D printed and manufactured with plastic materials.

<sup>2</sup> This project was supported by Grant No. 2020-GP-BX-0078 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

# The Issue of Firearm-Related Crime

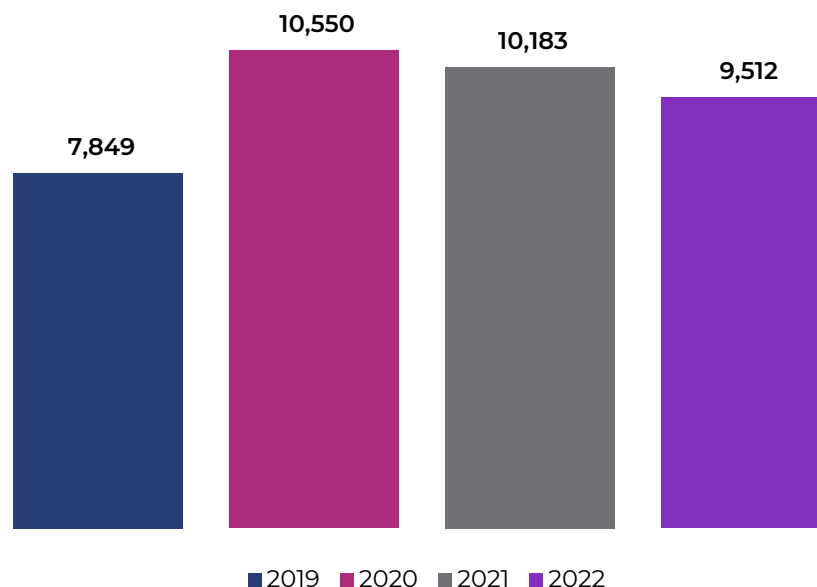
The San Diego region, much like other metropolitan areas, have growing concerns about gun crimes and their impact on public safety. To understand this multi-faceted issue, it is important to gather data from several different valid sources. The analyses conducted with these data can help inform policies and law enforcement strategies.

## Firearm-Related Calls for Service

Although not every call for service (CFS) results in a crime incident, it can be used as a measure of firearm activity. In addition, CFS data can be indicative of demand for police service.

The volume of firearm-related CFS in the San Diego region increased 34% from 2019 to 2020, but has decreased since the high in 2020 (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> Overall, there was a daily average of 21.5 firearm-related CFS in 2019, 28.2 in 2020, 27.9 in 2021, and 26.1 in 2022.

**Figure 1: Number of Firearm-Related Calls for Service in the San Diego Region, 2019-2022**



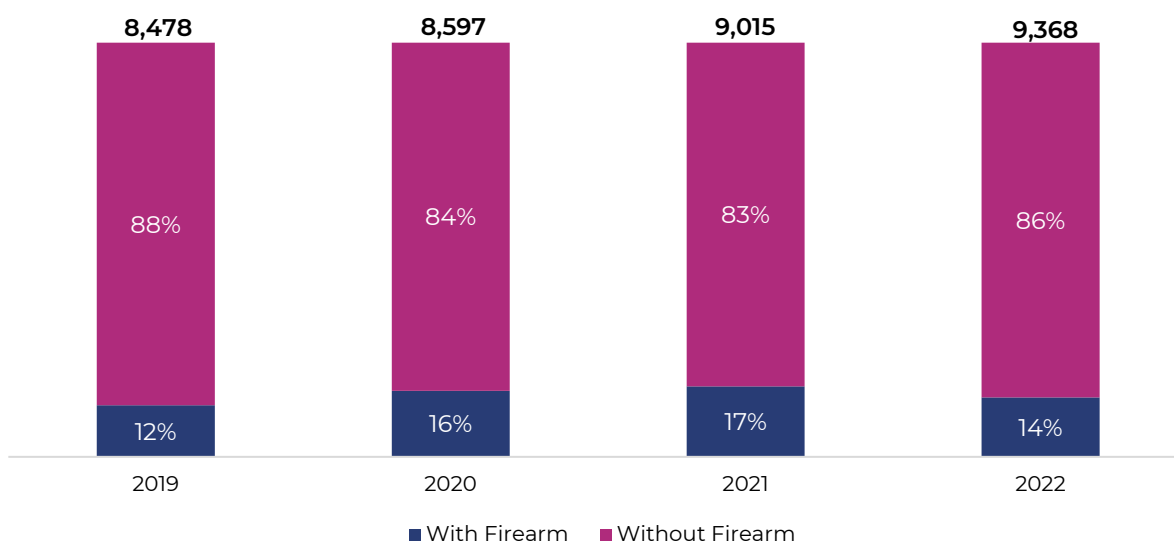
Source: SANDAG

## Firearms and Violent Crime

The total number of violent crimes (i.e., homicide, robbery, aggravated assault) has increased every year between 2019 and 2022 in the San Diego region, with the percentage of violent crimes that involve the use of a firearm also increasing from 12% in 2019, to 17% in 2021 (Figure 2). The upward trend reverted in 2022 with a 3% decline to 14%, but this was still higher than 2019 (Figure 2).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that while a CFS may be considered firearm-related, citizens that report shots fired may have heard a sound resembling a gunshot, but no shot occurred.

**Figure 2: Number of Violent Crimes with and without a Firearm in the San Diego Region, 2019-2022**



Source: SANDAG; ARJIS

Looking at the crime categories separately, the percentage of homicides that involved a firearm saw increases from 51% in 2019, to 56% in 2020 and 2021, and a decrease to 55% in 2022 (Table 1). Robberies that involved a firearm saw slight increases from 14% in 2019, to 17% in 2020 and 2021, and a 3% decline in 2022 (Table 1). Aggravated assaults that involved a firearm also increased from 11% in 2019, to 15% in 2020, to 16% in 2021, but decreased to 14% in 2022 (Table 1).<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1: Number of Violent Crimes and the Percent that Involved a Firearm in the San Diego Region, 2019-2022**

Crime Type	2019	2020	2021	2022
Homicide	78 (51%)	107 (56%)	112 (56%)	98 (55%)
Robbery	2,814 (14%)	2,392 (17%)	2,316 (17%)	2,514 (14%)
Aggravated Assault	5,586 (11%)	6,098 (15%)	6,587 (16%)	6,756 (14%)

Sources: SANDAG; ARJIS

Note: The percentages in the parentheses represent the proportion of that crime category for that given year that involved a firearm.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that increases in violent crime during the COVID-19 pandemic are not unique to the San Diego region, as similar increases were seen in several major metropolitan areas. Rosenfeld, R., Boxerman, B., & Lopez, E. (2023). Pandemic, social unrest, and crime in U.S. cities: Year-End 2022 Update. Council on Criminal Justice.

# Access to and Use of Firearms

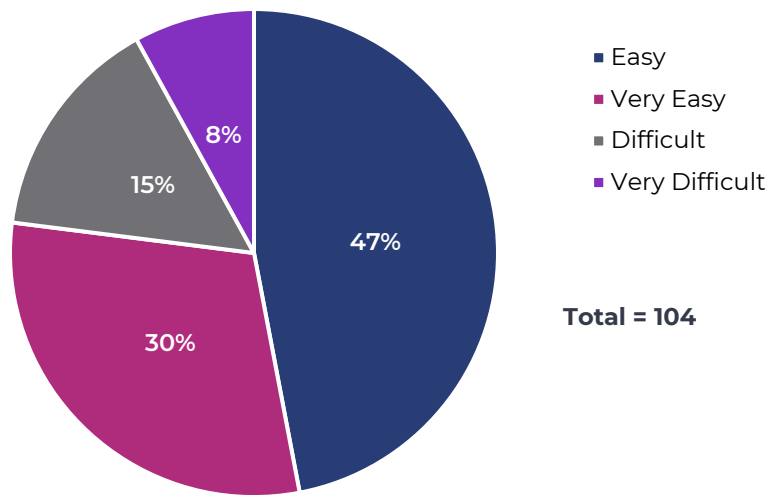
Part of this project involved interviews of arrestees in local jails to learn about access to and usage of firearms.<sup>5</sup> In 2022, 232 male and 113 female arrestees were interviewed. Through interviewing the arrestee population, it is possible to gain insights into access and usage of guns in crime that may not have been gained otherwise.

## Access to Guns

**Over one-third (36%) of arrestee respondents reported ever having a gun, but of those, only 17% (1 in 6) reported having a gun in the past 30 days. Interviewees owned, carried, or possessed a median of three guns,<sup>6</sup> which is more than the average 1.21 guns per American citizen.<sup>7</sup> In terms of how the firearms were obtained, the median number obtained illegally ( $M=1$ ) was higher than those legally obtained ( $M=0$ ) (data not shown).**

Not including ghost guns, over three-fourths (77%) of arrestees reported that getting a gun was “Very Easy” or “Easy” (Figure 3). When asked how they obtained their firearm, most of them bought it (Figure 4). Of those that purchased their firearm, most of them did from friends, gun shops, or off the street (Figure 5).

**Figure 3: Obtaining Firearm Difficulty**



Source: SANDAG

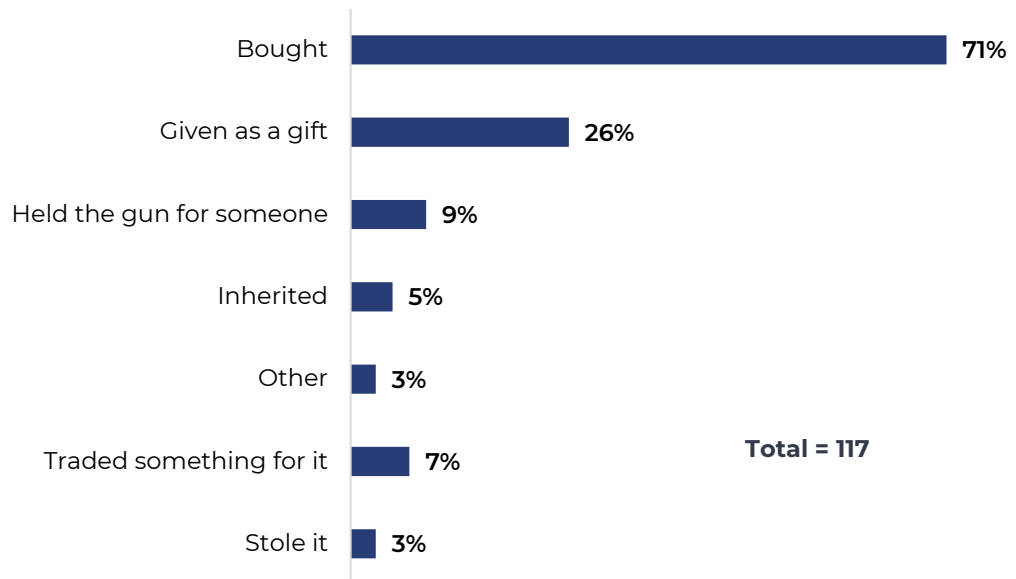
Note: Missing data not included.

<sup>5</sup> Access to these interviewees was due in part to SANDAG’s Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) project.

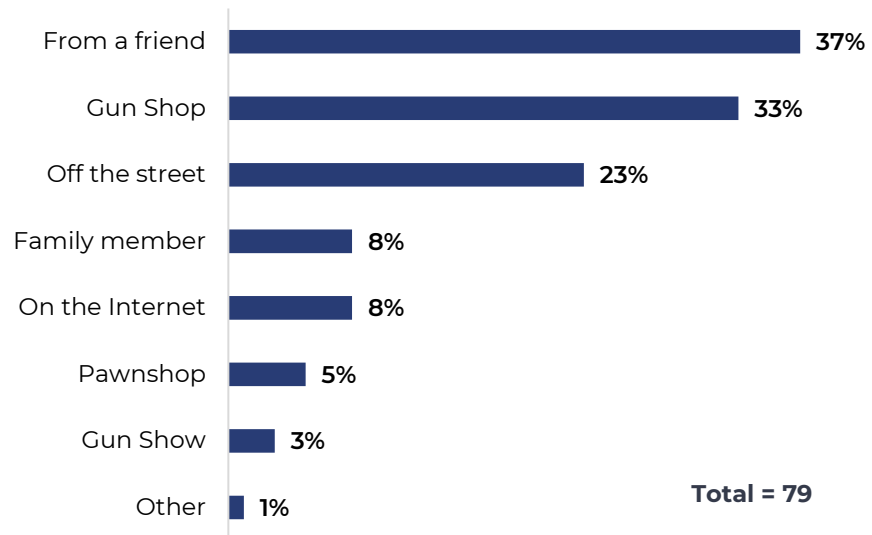
<sup>6</sup> The median is the value that is in the middle of a dataset when it is ordered. Medians are often used when there are outliers that might skew the average of the values. Due to the high standard deviations, medians are presented.

<sup>7</sup> Karp, A. (2018). Estimating global civilian-held firearms numbers. Small Arms Survey. Available at <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP-Civilian-Firearms-Numbers.pdf>

**Figure 4: Method of Obtaining Firearm**



**Figure 5: Location of Firearm Purchase**



Source: SANDAG

Note: Missing data not included.

## Access to Ghost Guns

Untraceable ghost guns can be problematic for law enforcement and for the safety of the public. As such, it is important to closely examine the frequency in which arrestees bought ghost guns and how they obtained them. **Nearly one fifth (18%) of the arrestee respondents reported buying a ghost gun.**

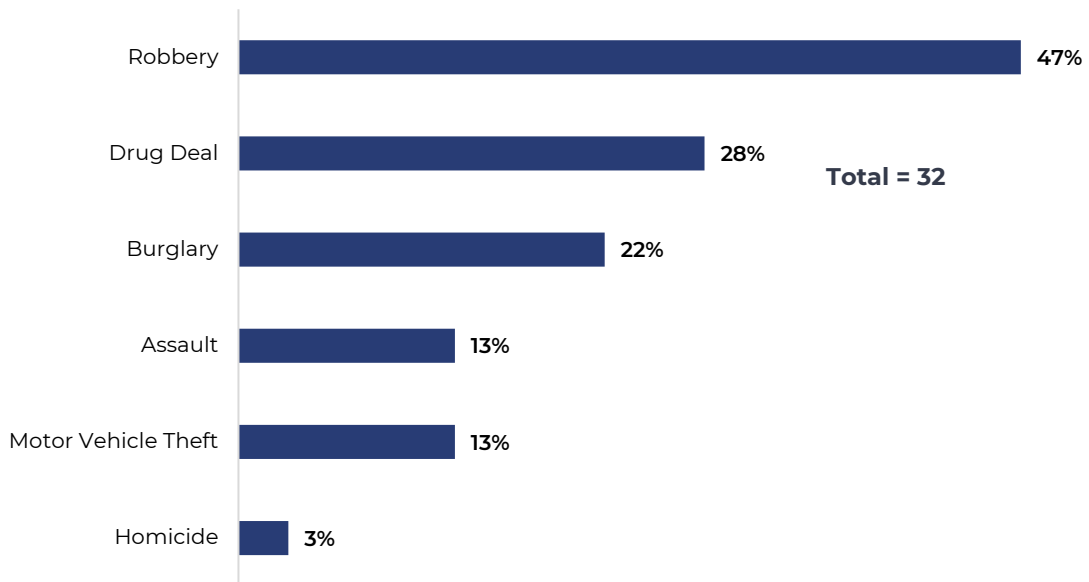
Of those respondents that reported buying a ghost gun, all reported that it was “Easy” or “Very Easy” to acquire the parts to build a ghost gun (not shown).<sup>8</sup> It will be challenging to regulate ghost guns as laws can make it more difficult to legally purchase firearms, but they are still limited in preventing the purchase and compilation of ghost guns or its parts.

## The Use of Firearms in Crime

In addition to understanding access to firearms, it is important to examine how guns are used in crimes.

**Nearly one third (32%) of arrestee respondents reported carrying a gun when committing a crime.** Of those instances, drug deals and robberies were reported as the most frequent types of crimes (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Type of Crime Committed While Carrying a Gun**



*Note: Missing data not included. Percentages will not add to 100% as the response categories were not mutually exclusive.*

*Source: SANDAG*

<sup>8</sup> This question was asked on a four-point scale from Very Difficult to Very Easy; however, none of the respondents indicated it was difficult or very difficult to obtaining parts to build a ghost gun.

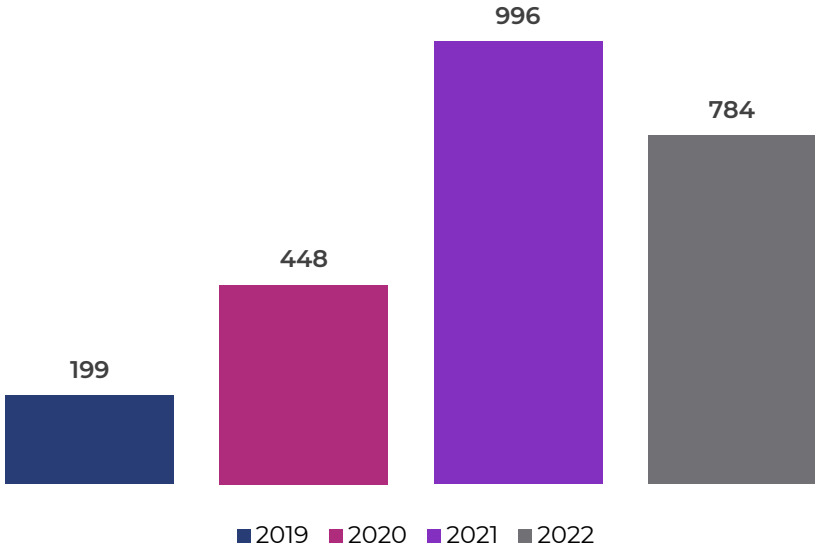
# Law Enforcement Response to Firearm-Related Crime

## Ghost Gun Seizures

Citizens and law enforcement agencies have expressed their concern about the growing trend of unregistered and untraceable ghost guns.<sup>9</sup>

The number of ghost guns seized in the region has increased each year from 2019 to 2021, though 2022 marked the first year in which there was a decrease (Figure 7). It is difficult to determine if increases are due to actual increases in activity or better tracking of the activity, and on the other hand if decreases are a sign of reduced activity, better concealment of such activity, or state/federal operations that may be occurring concurrently, thus not being counted in the regional numbers.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 7: Number of Ghost Guns Seized in the San Diego Region, 2019-2022**



Source: SANDAG

<sup>9</sup> California Office of the Attorney General. (2022, October 7). Attorney General Bonta Announces Arrest of Suspect with Illegal Ghost Guns, Machine Gun Kits, and Assault Weapons [Press release]. <https://oag.ca.gov/news/press-releases/attorney-general-bonta-announces-arrest-suspect-illegal-ghost-guns-machine-gun#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20illegal%20ghost,impacts%20the%20work%20of%20DOJ>.

<sup>10</sup> Agencies varied in how they tracked ghost guns seized and when they started collected said data. Several departments use a Firearm Manufactured by Unlicensed Subject (FMBUS) number to tag these incidents while others used a special studies code. Also, some departments started tracking ghost gun seizures in 2019 while some started in late 2021 and retroactively tagged some incidents from prior years. Because there is currently no standardized way to track these data, it is important to note that these values are likely an undercount. These values can also be an undercount as state and federal agencies also make gun crime arrests that are not counted by the local agencies.

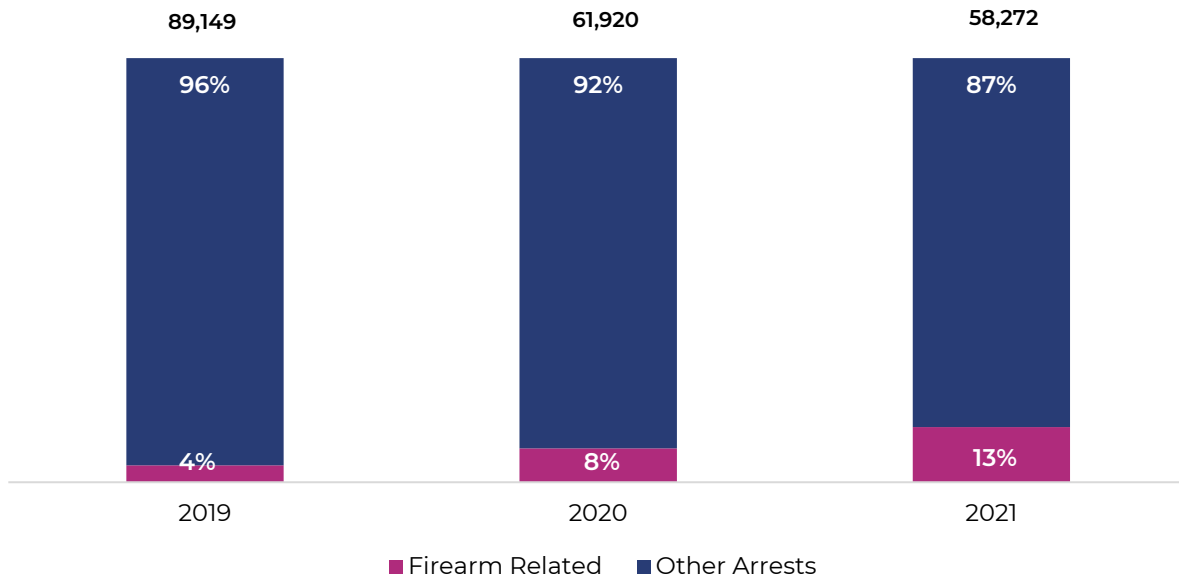


## Arrests for Firearm-Related Crime

In addition to examining crimes committed with a firearm, it is important to examine law enforcement's response to said crimes. These data can indicate where more resources are possibly needed and can be applied in justice system planning. At the time of this publication, arrest data from 2022 was not available.

There has been an overall downward trend of total arrests in the region over the last two years, which in part can be attributed to changes in law enforcement arrest protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the percentage of arrests for firearm-related offenses increased from 4% in 2019 to 8% in 2020 and 13% in 2021 (Figure 8). As departments issued more warnings and citations for less serious offenses during 2020 and 2021, law enforcement likely focused making arrests in more serious incidents, particularly those that involved firearms.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 8: Total Number of Arrests and Arrests for Firearm Related Offenses in the San Diego Region, 2019-2021**



Source: SANDAG

<sup>11</sup> Over 360 existing felony and misdemeanor level firearm-related penal and municipal codes were included to examine the number of arrests for firearm-related offenses by jurisdiction and location. A list of these codes are available upon request.

## Final Takeaway

There are multiple facets to firearm-related crime in the San Diego region. While the total number of violent crimes has increased from 2019 to 2022, the proportion of those committed with a firearm decreased from 17% in 2021 to 14% in 2022—albeit still higher than in 2019. Also, the region experienced increases in ghost gun seizures from 2019 to 2021, but 2022 was the first year that marked a decrease in seizures. However, it is important to frame these findings within the context of a pandemic and its impacts on citizen behavior, and protocols and priorities by law enforcement.

There are data limitations to answer pressing questions (i.e., the level of ghost gun activity in the region) which may limit our understanding of the full extent of ghost gun activity in the region. As such, it is important for law enforcement agencies and stakeholders to continue collaborating to share available information and resources, collect comprehensive data, and adapt policies accordingly to ensure the safety and well-being of the community.

For example, there are other efforts in the region to understand gun violence.

In June 2023, San Diego County released a gun violence reduction community needs assessment report.<sup>12</sup> In this report, the Health Assessment and Research for Communities (HARC) organization highlights important information about firearm-related violence, such as the high disproportion of firearm-related homicide, with a rate among Black individuals of 9.9 per 100,000 residents, as opposed to 1.0 for White individuals. Additionally, the report points to the spatial concentration of firearm-related deaths mainly in the Central and East Suburban areas of the County. While the report highlights a general sentiment of safety in the communities (66.5% of survey participants), still a large number report a concern about gun violence (60.8%). The same report found, however, that from 2017 to 2022 most of the firearm-related deaths in the region have been due to suicide (70.9%). These findings emphasize the utility of different data sources and metrics to gain insight and understand a little deeper the complexities when looking into gun violence and gun-related deaths.

To continue the region's efforts to shed light on gun violence, this brief will be updated on an annual basis to provide trend insights on firearm-related crime and ghost gun seizures. Additionally, SANDAG will provide supplementary updates on a semi-annual basis to compare data to the previous year. Trend data is important to help identify possible surges or decreases in crime. Additionally, analyzing trend data over time can help policymakers implement targeted interventions.

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<sup>12</sup> For more information: <https://engage.sandiegocounty.gov/gvrp>