

Firearm Crime in the San Diego Region 2023

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

June 2024

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Introduction

In 2022, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) Criminal Justice Research Division began to track crime that involves firearms around the region from law enforcement data maintained by 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.”¹

This CJ Brief examines the issue of firearm-related crimes, 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 SANDAG 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.²

Highlights

- The region experienced a daily average of 26 firearm-related CFS in 2023, which is the lowest since 2019.
- There were fewer violent crimes in 2023, with the proportion involving a firearm also decreasing from the previous year.
- For the second year, the number of ghost guns seized has decreased.
- More than two in three (69%) arrestees that reported ever buying or building a ghost gun, said it was “Easy” or “Very Easy” to obtain.
- For two years in a row since 2021, the proportion of arrests that were for firearm related offenses decreased.

¹ 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 firearm (i.e., the firearm’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.

² This project was supported by Grant No. 15PBJA-21-GG-3006-GUNP awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). 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

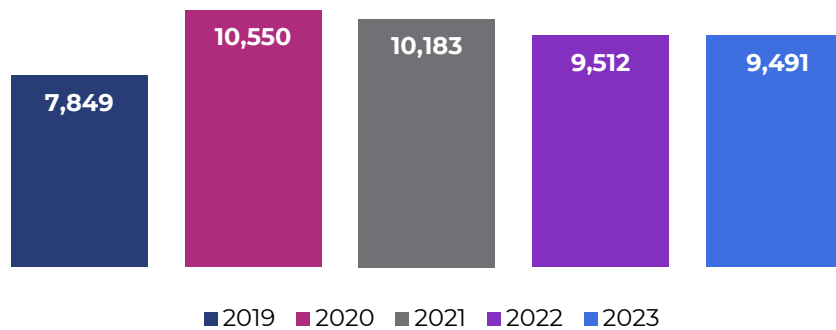
The San Diego region, much like other metropolitan areas, has growing concerns about firearm crime and its impact on public safety. To understand this multi-faceted issue, it is important to gather data from several different valid sources. The analyses conducted with these data can help inform policies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

Firearm-Related Calls for Service

Although not every 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).³ Overall, there was a daily average of 21.5 firearm-related CFS in 2019 and 26.0 in 2023. **The region has experienced a downward trend in firearm related CFS since 2020, but still higher than pre-pandemic.**

Figure 1: Number of Firearm-Related Calls for Service in the San Diego Region, 2019-2023



Source: SANDAG

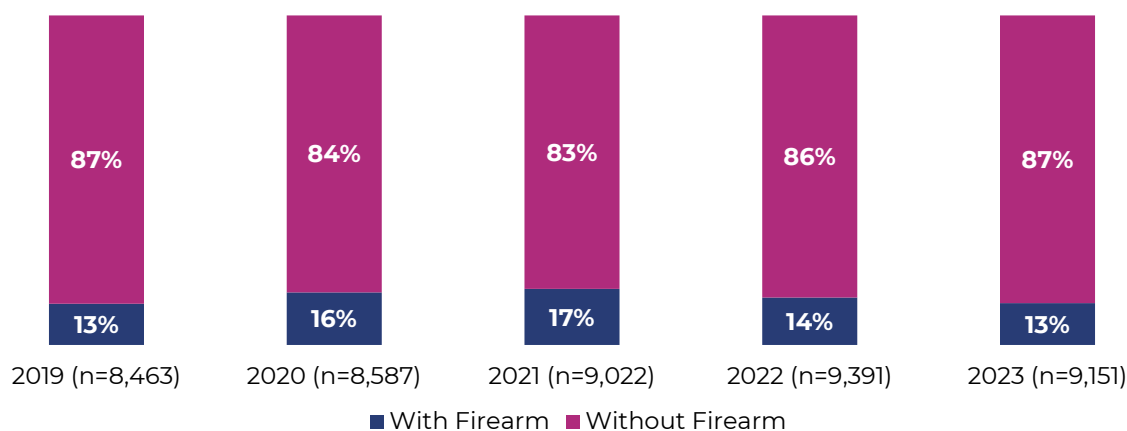
Firearms and Violent Crime

The total number of violent crimes (i.e., homicide, robbery, aggravated assault) reported in the region increased every year between 2019 and 2022, but decreased 3% in 2023, compared to 2022. Likewise, the percentage of violent crimes that involve the use of a firearm also increased from 12% in 2019, to 17% in 2021, but decreased in 2022 (14%) and 2023 (13%) (Figure 2).

CFS peaked in 2020, but violent crime and violent crime with a firearm peaked in 2021

³ 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, 2019-2023



Sources: SANDAG; ARJIS

Looking at the crime categories separately, the percentage of homicides that involved a firearm increased every year from 2019 to 2022 but decreased from 58% in 2022 to 44% in 2023. In comparison, the percentage of robberies and aggravated assaults that involved a firearm increased in 2020 and 2021 compared to 2019, but started dropping in 2022.⁴ **In summary, the past year has seen important reductions in violent crimes across categories. Importantly, this downward trend extends to incidents involving the use of a firearm, mirroring the overall decrease in violent crime rates.**

In 2023, 4 in 10 homicides and around 1 in 10 robberies and aggravated assaults involved a firearm

Table 1: Number of Violent Crimes and the Percent that Involved a Firearm in the San Diego Region, 2019-2023

Crime Type	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Homicide	78 (51%)	108 (56%)	113 (57%)	99 (58%)	77 (44%)
Robbery	2,813 (14%)	2,390 (17%)	2,317 (17%)	2,520 (14%)	2,300 (12%)
Aggravated Assault	5,572 (11%)	6,089 (15%)	6,592 (16%)	6,772 (14%)	6,774 (13%)

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

Sources: SANDAG; ARJIS

⁴ 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. Lopez, E. & Boxerman, B. (2024). Crime Trends in U.S. Cities: Year-End 2023 Update. Washington, DC: Council on Criminal Justice.

Access to and Use of Firearms

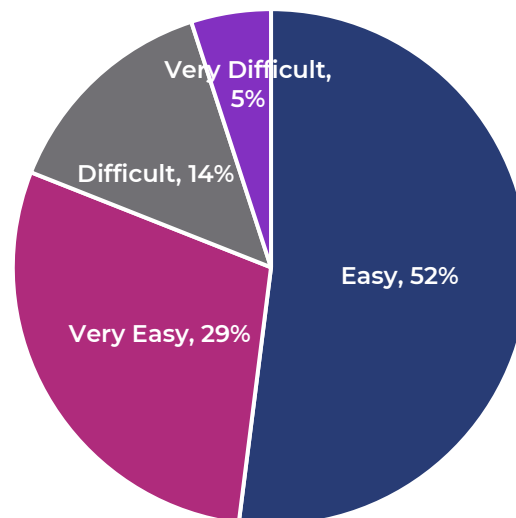
Part of this project involved interviews of arrestees in local jails to learn about access to and usage of firearms.⁵ In 2023, 239 male and 116 female arrestees were interviewed. Through interviewing the arrestee population, it is possible to gain insights into access and usage of firearms in crime that may not have been gained otherwise.

Access to Firearms

Around one-third (34%) of arrestee respondents reported ever having a firearm, but of those, only 19% reported having a firearm in the past 30 days. Interviewees owned, carried, or ever possessed a median of 2.0 firearms,⁶ which is more than the average 1.2 firearms per American citizen.⁷ 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 four-fifths (81%) of arrestees reported that getting a firearm 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 a gun shop, off the street or from a friend (Figure 5).

Figure 3: Perceptions of Arrestees on Difficulty Obtaining a Firearm



Total= 97

Note: Cases with missing data not included.

Source: SANDAG

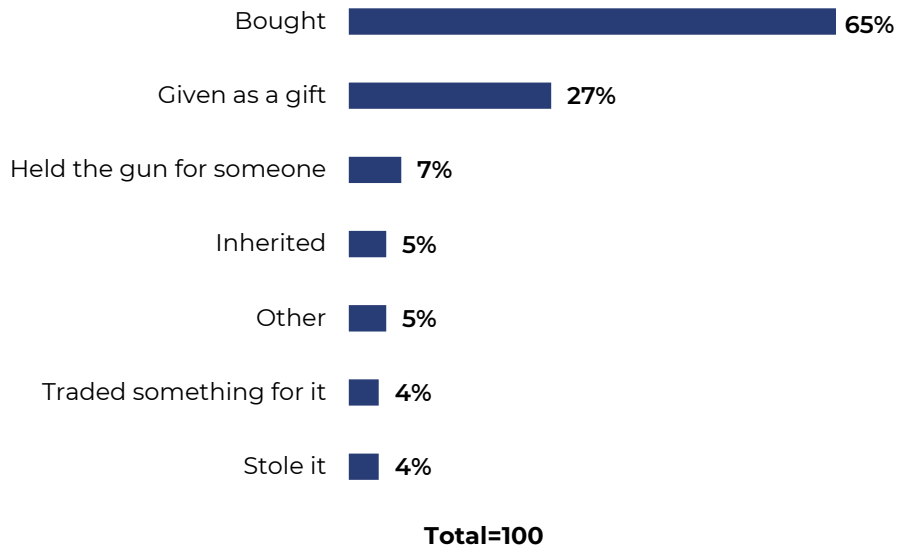
⁵ Access to these interviewees was due in part to the SANDAG SAM project.

<https://www.sandag.org/data-and-research/criminal-justice-and-public-safety/evaluation-services/drugs>

⁶ 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 high standard deviations, medians are presented.

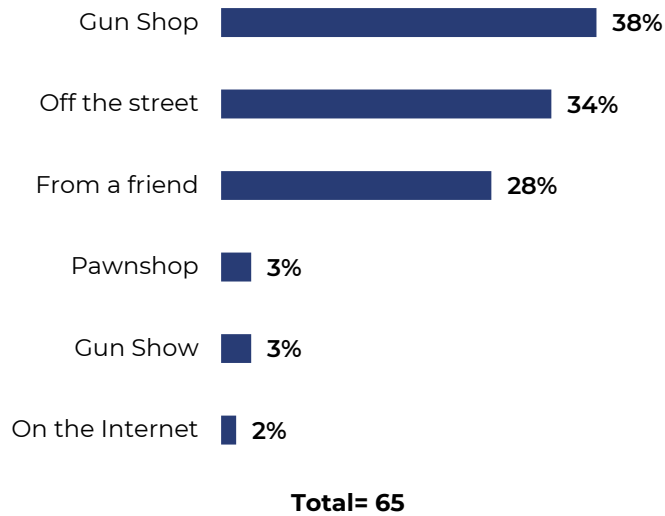
⁷ Karp, A. (2018). Estimating global civilian-held firearms numbers. Small Arms Survey. Available at <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP-Civilian-Firearms-Numbers.pdf>

Figure 4: Arrestees Responses on Method for Obtaining a Firearm



*Note: Cases with missing data not included.
Source: SANDAG*

Figure 5: Arrestees Responses on Location of Firearm Purchases



*Note: Cases with missing data not included.
Source: SANDAG*

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.

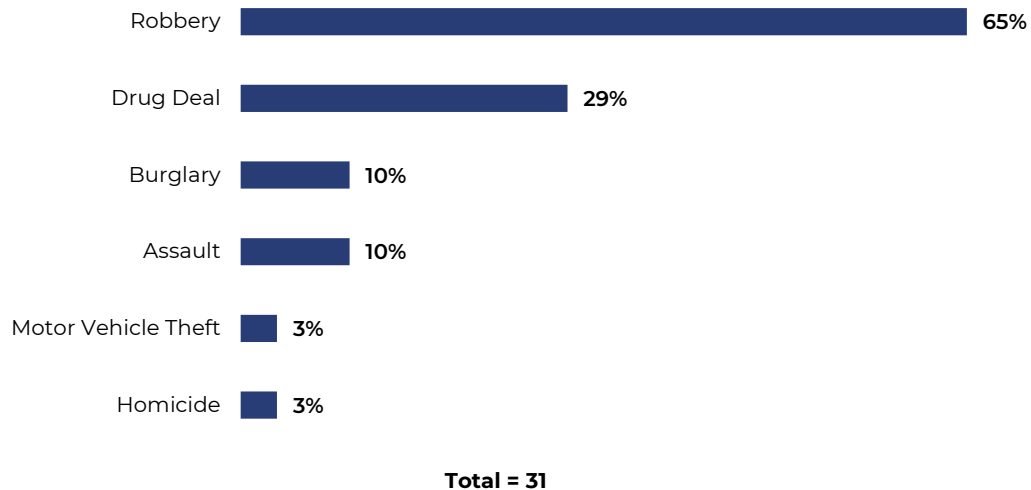
Nearly one-fifth (18%) of the arrestee respondents reported buying or building a ghost gun. This number remains consistent with last year's reporting (not shown). Of those respondents that reported buying a ghost gun, 69% reported that it was "Easy" or "Very Easy" to acquire the parts to build a ghost gun, while 31% reported that it was "Difficult" or "Very Difficult" (not shown). Regulating ghost guns will be challenging to regulate ghost guns as laws can make it more difficult to legally purchase firearms because, while laws can make it more difficult to legally purchase firearms, they are still limited in preventing the purchase and assembly of ghost guns or their parts.

Use of Firearms in Crime

In addition to understanding access to firearms, it is important to examine how firearms are used in crimes as it provides a holistic view of the issue and allows for more effective and multifaceted approaches to reducing firearm violence.

One-third (33%) of arrestee respondents reported carrying a firearm when committing a crime. Of those instances, robberies and drug deals were reported as the most frequent types of crimes (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Type of Crime Committed While Carrying a Firearm



*Note: Cases with missing data not included. Percentages based on multiple responses.
Source: SANDAG*

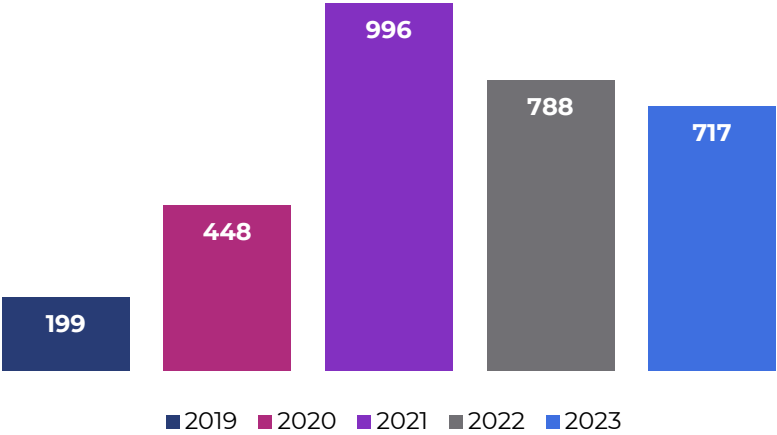
Law Enforcement Response to Firearm-Related Crime

Ghost Gun Seizures

Citizens and law enforcement agencies have expressed their concern about the growing trend of unregistered and untraceable ghost guns.⁸

The number of ghost guns seized in the region increased each year from 2019 to 2021, though in 2022 the trend started to reverse with a decrease of 21% and a subsequent decrease in 2023 of 9% (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.⁹

Figure 7: Number of Ghost Guns Seized in the San Diego Region, 2019-2023



Note: Data presented in this report may vary from previous reports as agencies can update their totals.
Source: SANDAG

⁸ California Office of the Attorney General. (2024, March 11). California Department of Justice Releases 2023 Armed and Prohibited Persons System Program Annual Report [Press release]. <https://oag.ca.gov/news/press-releases/california-department-justice-releases-2023-armed-and-prohibited-persons-system>

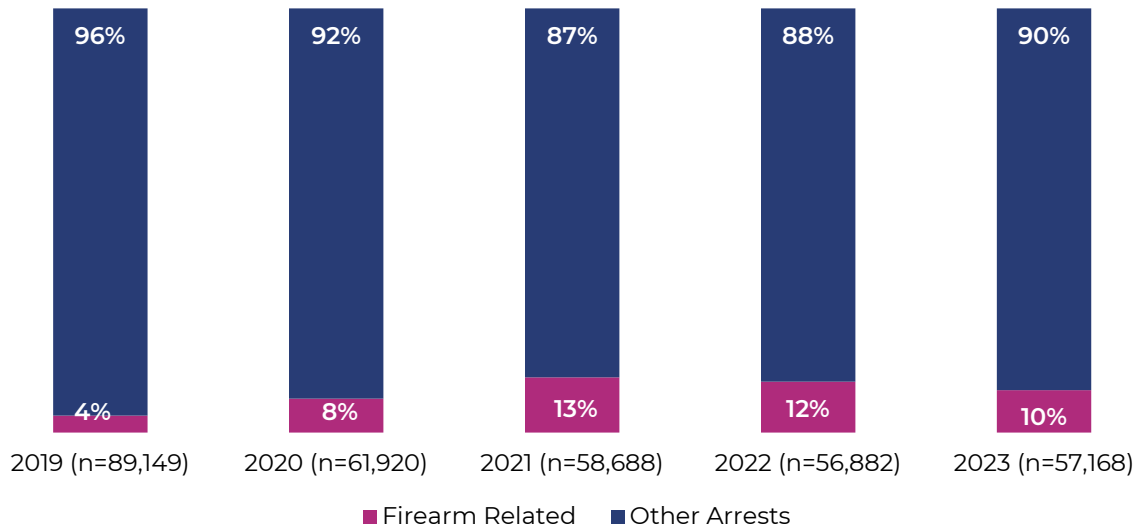
⁹ Agencies varied in how they tracked ghost guns seized and when they started collected said data. Several departments use a Firearm Manufactured by Unlicensed Subject (FMBUS) number to tag these incidents while others used a special studies code. Also, some departments started tracking ghost gun seizures 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 firearm 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 these crimes. These data can indicate where more resources are possibly needed and can be applied in justice system planning.

There has been an overall downward trend of total arrests in the region in the two years following 2020, which in part can be attributed to changes in law enforcement arrest protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. **However, 2023 experienced an increase in the total number of arrests.** Additionally, the percentage of arrests for firearm-related offenses increased from 2019 to 2021, but the upward trend reverted in 2022 to 12%, and further to 10% in 2023 (Figure 8). As departments issued more warnings and citations for less serious offenses between 2020 and 2022, law enforcement likely focused making arrests in more serious incidents, particularly those that involved firearms.¹⁰ The 10% rate in 2023 may suggest that agencies returning to pre-pandemic protocols.

Figure 8: Total Number of Arrests and Arrests for Firearm-Related Offenses in the San Diego Region, 2019-2023



Sources: SANDAG; ARJIS

¹⁰ 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 2023, the proportion of those committed with a firearm decreased for a second year in a row from 14% in 2022 to 13% in 2023. Also, the region experienced increases in ghost gun seizures from 2019 to 2021, but 2023 was the second year in a row 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.¹¹ More data sources and metrics will provide more insight and help develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of firearm violence in our region.

Under the PSN project, SANDAG will continue doing periodical updates on this topic. 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.

¹¹ Current efforts to better understand firearm violence in the region include a firearm violence reduction community needs assessment report from 2023 by the San Diego County that highlights the disproportion of firearm-related homicide, the spatial concentration of firearm-related deaths, and the high proportion of firearm-related deaths due to suicide. For more information visit: <https://engage.sandiegocounty.gov/gvrp>