

SUMMARY:

FACTS ABOUT THE WAR ON GUN POSSESSION IN CHICAGO

fact 1	<p>The evolution of American gun possession laws is tightly linked to historical and ongoing state-sanctioned violence and racialized perceptions of crime and safety. Firearm ownership has always been a deeply racialized issue, and over time, gun licensure laws in Illinois have become some of the most extreme in the nation. These laws have incredible enforcement power thanks to the expansion of policing ushered in by the War on Drugs; the Chicago Police Department budget, for instance, tripled from 1964 to 2020.</p>
fact 2	<p>Gun ownership in Chicago is largely driven by safety concerns, especially in disinvested communities. Unlicensed gun possession in Chicago is common in some areas due to multiple interconnected factors, such as segregation, poverty, accessibility of guns, being unsafe, and dual victimization. The very people facing the greatest risk of arrest for gun possession also have the greatest need for self-protection.</p>
fact 3	<p>Significant barriers to legal firearm ownership disproportionately impact young, Black Chicagoans. The law excludes many people that feel the need to carry guns for protection from legally possessing them. Due to the racial disparities in poverty, neighborhood violence, and contact with the criminal legal system, Black people bear the brunt of the barriers to legal gun ownership, which contributes to their bearing the brunt of prosecution and punishment for illegal gun possession.</p>
fact 4	<p>Enforcement of gun laws in Cook County primarily and increasingly targets nonviolent possession. The enforcement of gun laws primarily targets possession rather than discharge of firearms, even though the former is not an inherently violent offense. This focus on possession has increased over the past decade: From 2014 to 2018, Cook County averaged 5 cases for gun possession for every gun discharge case and incarcerated 4 people for gun possession for every person they incarcerated for gun discharge; from 2019 to 2023, these ratios increased to 6:1 and 14:1 respectively.</p>
fact 5	<p>Arrests for gun possession in Cook County have increased over the last decade and are racially, economically, and geographically disparate. Even as overall arrests have gradually decreased from 2002 to 2022, the historically stable number of annual arrests for gun possession has experienced a sharp incline since 2015 and remain primarily concentrated in certain Chicago neighborhoods. Since 2011, Black and Latine people have comprised 97% of felony cases for gun possession and 97% of people convicted and incarcerated in these cases.</p>
fact 6	<p>Prosecution for gun possession is strict; an increasing proportion of cases end in guilty pleas with limited opportunities for diversion. Pleading guilty for a felony charge is, by far, the most common outcome for someone accused of illegal gun possession in Cook County: 60% of these cases have ended in guilty pleas since 2017.</p>
fact 7	<p>The hypercriminalization of gun possession has dire consequences and fails to address the root causes of gun violence. Despite research that shows the devastating impacts of incarceration on individuals and communities, law enforcement and prosecutors continue a tough-on-gun-possession strategy. Injuries and deaths from guns have vacillated independently of arrests since 2014, showing no evidence that the heightened criminalization has been effective in reducing gun violence in Chicago.</p>
fact 8	<p>Strategies to address gun violence that don't rely on carceral logic are practiced in Chicago and deserve investment. There are several strategies currently being practiced in Chicago to address the root causes of gun violence that have been effective without relying on carceral practices; resource distribution to groups empowering communities to keep themselves safe, and especially those practicing harm reduction, is necessary.</p>