

California gun sales rise, injuries decrease

By Phillip Reese and Cynthia Hubert, Sacramento Bee

California has millions more guns than it did 10 years ago. It also has thousands fewer gun injuries and deaths each year.

Those are two simple facts that, depending on whom you ask, have everything or nothing to do with each other.

Last month's horrific Connecticut school shooting has reignited the debate over gun control in California, a state with some of the nation's strictest gun laws. State legislators will likely take up additional gun law proposals later this year, ranging from further limits on ammunition purchases to requiring regular background checks for gun owners.

If recent trends hold, that debate will take place as gun sales boom and gun injuries fall.

From one perspective, those figures suggest more guns mean less violence – a view embraced by many gun rights advocates. They say criminals are less inclined to draw their weapons out of fear their targets will also be packing heat.

“Criminals don't know who has a gun,” said Sam Paredes, executive director of Folsom-based Gun Owners of California. So they ask themselves, “why go into a dangerous situation?”

Others who study crime in California and America say the trends are more nuanced. Most gun-related hospitalizations and deaths are due to assaults. And the drop in firearm-related injuries in California coincides with a well-documented, nationwide drop in violent crime that began in the early 1990s.

Researchers said that drop has little to do with gun sales, which peaked in California around 1993 as gun crime also hit a high point. For much of the 1990s, guns sales fell while gun injuries also declined.

Instead they say changing demographics, improved law enforcement techniques, stronger laws dictating who can legally buy guns, increasing incarceration rates, and falling gang violence, among other factors, have driven down gun injuries and deaths.

“People who are passionate about guns see things through a single-subject lens,” said Frank Zimring, a UC Berkeley law professor and author of “The Great American Crime Decline,” a book on nationwide crime trends.

Not in dispute is the fact that guns are flying off California shelves.

Dealers sold 600,000 guns in California during 2011, up from 350,000 in 2002, according to records of sales tallied by the California attorney general’s office.

Those figures track sales, not ownership, and don’t include guns taken across state lines.

At the same time, the number of hospitalizations in the state due to gun injuries dropped roughly 28 percent, from about 4,000 in 2002 to 2,900 in 2011, according to records newly collected by the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development.

Gun-related deaths in California fell 13 percent over roughly the same period, from about 3,200 to about 2,800, according to the California Department of Public Health.

Even with the declines, California, which would be the world’s ninth largest economy if it was a separate nation, has a higher rate of gun-related homicides than almost any

industrialized country, United Nations figures show.”

The decadelong surge in gun sales is driven partially by a widespread fear of more gun control, several gun dealers said.

Ten years ago, roughly 5 million Californians, or 20 percent of the state’s adults, had at least one gun in their home, according to the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

Since then, California gun dealers have sold another 4 million guns.

The uptick in sales started in 2004, but exploded around 2008, when Barack Obama was elected president.

“When the president or senators threaten to take people’s gun rights away, that’s when we see things really pick up,” said Bryan Schaff, owner of Hoffmeyer’s Firearms & Sporting Goods in Grass Valley.

This phenomenon happened again last month during calls for new gun control measures in the wake of the Sandy Hook Elementary shootings. “Since the school shooting there is nothing left out on the market at all,” said Dan Hendrix, of Dan’s Discount Guns & Ammo in Oakdale.

Some researchers said the notion that more legal gun sales would immediately lead to more gun injuries ignores a basic truth: Guns were everywhere in California a decade ago; and they are everywhere today.

“My guess is that we are way beyond that,” said Mark Kleiman, a UCLA public policy professor who has written on guns and crime, when asked if California has reached a saturation point for guns.

More important than the increase in gun sales, several researchers said, is who is buying guns. Young men are the most likely demographic group to be injured or killed with a gun, state health records show.

“If you have a population entirely comprised of little old ladies, you can increase the number of guns and nothing is going to happen,” said Will Vizzard, a California State University, Sacramento, criminal justice professor who has written extensively about guns and crime.

Vizzard noted that many crimes are committed using stolen guns – gang members killing one another, for instance – or by people who legally own a gun who get caught in the heat of the moment.

About 40 percent of guns used by felons nationwide before their admission to state or federal prison were stolen or bought on the street, according to a survey released in 2002 by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Another 40 percent were obtained from friends or family, leaving about 15 percent purchased in stores and 5 percent acquired in other ways.

Vizzard cited last week’s Old Sacramento shooting, in which Gabriel Cordova, 35, and Daniel Ferrier, 36, were killed and two others were wounded when Carlito Montoya allegedly opened fire in a bar.

Police say Montoya, 22, was involved in an argument with Cordova and his wife over a spilled drink, and pulled out a gun – allegedly stolen – when things got heated.

“You have a bunch of people together and somebody bothers somebody else. And the guy shoots the wrong people,” Vizzard said.

State officials do not release demographic information on gun owners, so it’s not clear just who has been buying firearms in California. Gun dealers and gun rights advocates argue that all types of people – hunters, target shooters, moms, elderly couples – are buying guns.

"It's a lot of first-time buyers," said Bill Sharff, co-owner of STS Guns in Folsom. "Half of the folks coming in here have never owned a gun."

Customers at area gun shops include older people and couples who enjoy testing their skills at shooting ranges, hunting game, firing at clay targets and participating in recreational gun clubs, dealers said.

It is not unusual, they said, for people who shoot for sport to have several guns of different types. Collectors may own a dozen or more weapons.

"I was raised up with guns," said Hendrix, whose father taught him to shoot as a boy. "I have always been comfortable with them." He now takes his own children hunting and target shooting.

Schaff, of Hoffmeyer's Firearms, said he carries a legal, concealed weapon on occasion when he travels to cities, keeps a gun at home for protection and enjoys recreational shooting and hunting. He also teaches classes on gun safety.

"We recommend that every new owner take a class before they even buy their gun," he said. At least half of his customers do so.

"I don't think stricter gun laws will help reduce violence at all," he said. "All it would do is penalize law-abiding citizens."

Daniel Webster, director of the Center for Gun Policy and Research at Johns Hopkins University, said he believes that most firearms sold recently in California were bought by people who already had guns, so the actual number of people who own firearms may not have risen much or at all.

Webster said the spike in gun sales has likely occurred among older men and women whose incomes have been less impacted by

the recession. "The behavior of these groups don't typically drive crime trends," he said.

Zimring, the UC Berkeley researcher, noted that gun ownership in California is much higher in rural, inland areas than in urban hubs like Los Angeles. Yet much of the decrease in crime over the last decade in California happened in Los Angeles County.

Rural areas tend to have more hunters and more political conservatives who support unfettered gun rights than urban areas such as San Francisco, which had the lowest rate of gun sales in 2011.

"Most of the places where people buy and own guns are outside the places with the most residents," Zimring said. "You have to be specific," when looking at gun injury and sales data, he added. "A state with 50 million people is not the right unit of analysis."

There is one broad point of agreement between both sides of the gun debate: Whether the buyers are seasoned hunters or first-time owners, most guns purchased legally in California are sold to law-abiding, responsible citizens.

"The guns that are being recorded are legally purchased, and I really don't think that these guns are being used in criminal conduct," said former Sacramento County Sheriff John McGinness.

An important consideration, then, when talking about the relationship between legal gun sales and gun injuries, McGinness and others said, isn't how many guns are sold or crime trends in a particular area; it's the personal decision made by millions of Californians each day to keep their guns secure.

The number of guns stolen nationwide, along with other types of theft, has dropped sharply over the last 15 years,

according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics.

“I hope that people who make the decision to purchase a gun store it safely,” McGinness said. “And make it damned difficult for someone to steal it.”