

GHOST GUNS

David Batten, Gun Violence Prevention Committee

The Gun Control Act of 1968 requires gun manufacturers to stamp serial numbers on all produced firearms so that the firearms may be identified and traceable. However, firearm regulations in the United States allow anyone to build and possess weapons for personal use without registering the firearm or placing an identifying serial number on the firearm. Such weapons are not traceable. Similarly, guns produced by 3D printers do not have serial numbers or any connection to a licensed gun manufacturer and are therefore also untraceable. Untraceable firearms are often referred to as “ghost guns.”



Gun components that are sold online do not need to be manufactured by a licensed manufacturer, nor are any background checks of the purchaser required. People wishing to build and own a firearm for personal use often purchase gun kits that are sold online. To avoid the requirements for serial numbers and background checks, these kits lack a crucial component of the firearm called the “lower receiver.” However, it is possible to separately purchase a lower receiver online that is partially complete (80%). Since the partially completed lower receiver is non-functional, it also does not require either a serial number or owner registration. When purchased together, with a little machining, the gun kit and partially completed lower receiver can be made into a functional, untraceable firearm—a ghost gun.

The danger to public safety presented by ghost guns is readily apparent and increasing. Ghost guns are untraceable, making investigation of ownership, possession, and usage difficult, and they are easily accessible to persons unable to pass a background check. 3D printed firearms provide an additional danger as they are often undetectable to metal detectors at our airports, arenas, schools and courtrooms.

The advent of 3D printers and the undetectable nature of firearms produced by them prompted the enactment of the Undetectable Firearms Act of 1988, which made it illegal to manufacture, possess or sell any firearm undetectable by common security metal detectors. This law has a ten-year sunset clause and was last reauthorized in 2013.

To address the dangers of ghost guns, the Untraceable Firearms Act (HR 3553) was introduced in the US House in June 2019. It would incorporate authorization of the Undetectable Firearms Act of 1988 and extend it to address all untraceable firearms. In Michigan, HB 5190, introduced in October 2019, would expand the definition of firearms within the state that are not permitted to be manufactured, sold, or possessed to include 3D printed firearms. This bill has been referred to the Judiciary Committee for review.