



FIREARM TECHNOLOGY AND VOCABULARY

To write or speak with legitimacy about guns, gun crime, and gun violence requires accurate use of terminology. This is a basic guide for describing firearms, accessories, and safety or regulatory technologies.

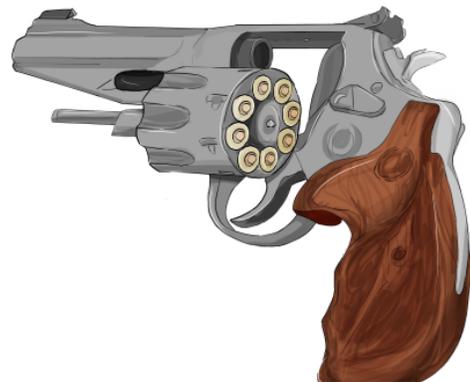
PROPERLY IDENTIFYING FIREARMS

Handguns

FACT: In 2013, handguns were used in 90.7% of firearm homicides where the type of gun used was known.¹



PISTOL: A handgun with a single chamber that is part of the barrel.



REVOLVER: A handgun with a spherical chamber that rotates when fired to align the next cartridge with the barrel.



Long Guns



SHOTGUN: A long-gun with smoothbore barrels that usually fires shotshells – cartridges containing numerous pellets that spread when fired.



RIFLE: A long gun with spiraled grooves called rifling in the barrel that cause the bullet to “spin like a football” for increased accuracy and aerodynamics.



AR-15: AR stands for ArmaLite Rifle (not “Assault Rifle” or “Automatic Rifle”); currently it is reportedly the best-selling rifle in the US.²



AK-47: AK stands for Avtomat Kalashnikova; this rifle was invented in the former Soviet Union and is the most abundant firearm worldwide.³

Automatic vs. Semi-Automatic

AUTOMATIC: Firearms that continuously fire when the trigger is pulled and stop when the trigger is released or all the ammunition runs out — often referred to as “machine guns.”⁴ Automatic weapons are regulated under the National Firearms Act, which prohibits civilians from purchasing or possessing automatic weapons manufactured after 1986. To obtain an automatic weapon produced before 1986, a person must complete an ATF application form,⁵ obtain law enforcement certification, and pass a background check. Transfers of pre-1986 machine guns also require payment of \$200.⁶

SEMI-AUTOMATIC: Firearms that fire a single shot every time the trigger is pulled and automatically reload without the user having to “cock” the gun or add ammunition. The majority of guns collected and sold in the United States are semi-automatic.⁷



PROPERLY DESCRIBING AMMUNITION

Bullet vs. Cartridge

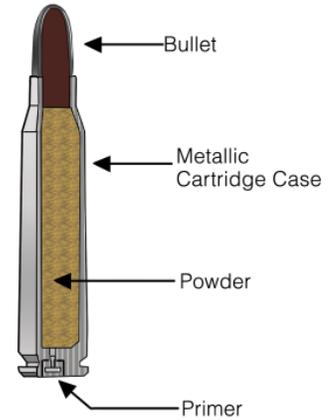
A cartridge is one piece of ammunition (“ammo”), and a bullet is the part of the cartridge that is propelled. A typical cartridge has four parts:

BULLET: The projectile fired from a cartridge when gases are produced by ignited gunpowder.⁸

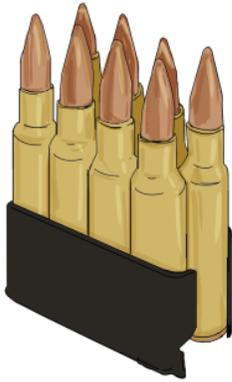
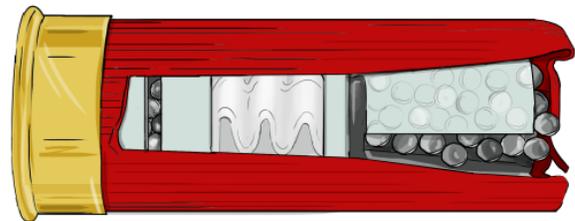
CASE: The container that keeps the parts of the cartridge together. It is often called a “shell casing,” but that is redundant. Police often recover casing at crime scenes.⁹

GUNPOWDER: The substance that serves as propellant charge.

PRIMER: An explosive material that initiates the ignition of a cartridge and, when struck, detonates the gunpowder.¹⁰



SHOTSHELLS (OR SHOTGUN SHELLS): A type of ammo that can be used with shotguns and contain “shot” — round projectiles pellets that are released when the shotshell is fired.¹¹



CLIP: An external container that holds cartridges in order to be loaded into a firearm.



MAGAZINE: An internal firearm container where cartridges are stored before entering the chamber of the gun

NOTE: The larger the magazine, the more rounds a shooter can fire before stopping to reload. Currently eight states (CA, CO, CT, HI, MD, MA, NJ, NY) and Washington, DC restrict civilian transfer or possession of high-capacity magazines. Some states define high-capacity magazines as those accepting 10 or more rounds of ammunition, whereas others define them as accepting 15 or more rounds.¹²

CALIBER: With the exception of shotguns, firearms are described by their caliber.¹³ Caliber is the measure of the inside diameter of gun’s barrel, and is expressed in millimeters or inches. For a firearm fired from a close distance, the higher the caliber, the more powerful the weapon.¹⁴

GAUGE: A gauge is the measure of how many lead balls of a shotgun bore’s diameter must be combined to weigh one pound. The lower the gauge, the more powerful the weapon.¹⁵

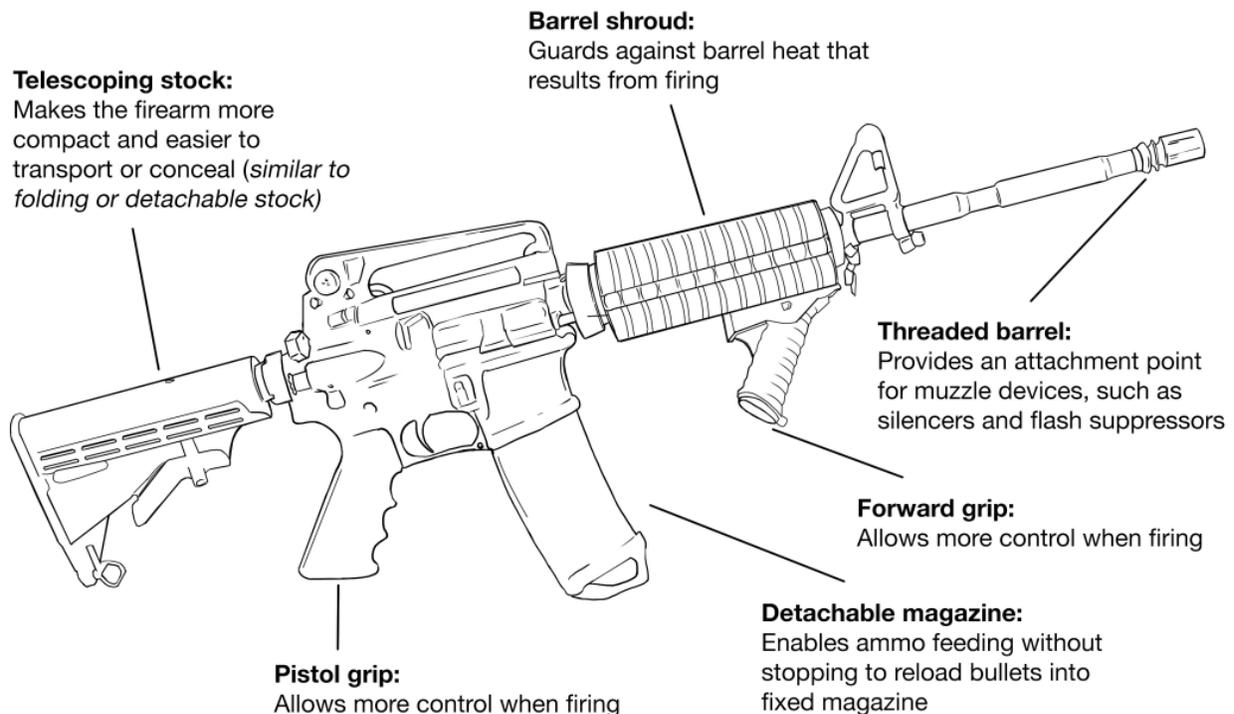


Assault Weapons

The definition of assault weapon varies among the states that use the term. Federal legislation restricting the possession of these weapons took effect in 1994 and expired in 2004. This legislation defined "assault weapon" to semiautomatic rifles, pistols, and shotguns with at least two of a list of specified military-style features, including flash suppressors, pistol grips, folding stocks, and barrel shrouds. The term also covered a list of named firearms and copies of those named firearms.¹⁶

Today there are seven states (CA, CT, HI, MD, MA, NJ, NY) that restrict access to assault weapons, utilizing varying definitions. Some state apply a "two-feature" test similar to that in the expired federal law, while others employ a broader "single-feature" test. Most definitions include a list of named firearms.¹⁷

Assault weapons are not automatic weapons, which are regulated under the National Firearms Act, as noted above. Assault weapons are sometimes referred to as "assault-style rifles" or "modern sporting rifles."¹⁸



EXAMPLES OF SAFETY TECHNOLOGIES

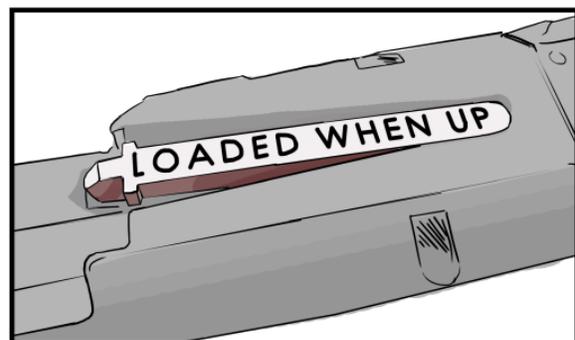
CABLE LOCK: A cable lock is a safe-storage device that can be inserted into a gun's barrel or action to prevent accidental discharge and can be removed with a key or combination, depending on the model.¹⁹



TRIGGER LOCK: A trigger lock is a safe-storage device that prevents the trigger of a firearm from being manipulated. Many popular models are small metal or plastic devices that go between and over the trigger guard and can be removed with a key or combination.^{20, 21}



LOADED CHAMBER INDICATORS: These indicators are built into firearms to indicate to users whether there is a round in the firing chamber.²² Even when a magazine is empty, there could still be a cartridge ready to discharge in the chamber.



OTHER TERMS

FEDERAL FIREARMS LICENSEE (FFL): Gun dealers (e.g. gun store owners or pawn shop purveyors), manufacturers, or importers that engage in the business of selling firearm and/or destructive devices and are required to be licensed under federal law.^{23,24} FFLs are required to keep records of their sales for 20 years²⁵ and to run background checks before selling or transferring firearms. Individuals who are not “engaged in the business” of selling, importing, or manufacturing firearms are not required by federal law to conduct background checks on people to whom they sell firearms.²⁶ Seventeen states currently go beyond federal law and require background checks on handgun sales by these unlicensed people as well.

NATIONAL INSTANT CRIMINAL BACKGROUND CHECK SYSTEM (NICS): A set of databases operated by the FBI that FFLs use to determine whether a person is eligible to purchase a firearm.²⁷ Before completing a sale, the FFL calls the FBI or a designated agency for their state, who runs a background check on the prospective buyer to determine whether he or she is prohibited from possessing firearms. These checks typically takes 90 seconds or less.

FIREARMS TRACING: When a gun is recovered at a crime scene, law enforcement agencies can send the model and serial number to the ATF National Tracing Center, which will attempt to trace the gun back to its manufacturer and from there to the firearms dealer who first sold it, who should have retained a record including details on the original purchaser.²⁸

TIME TO CRIME: The amount of time between the first legal purchase of a firearm and its recovery by law enforcement in a crime. Guns recovered within three years of their original purchase have a “short time-to-crime” and are more likely to have been trafficked.²⁹

MICROSTAMPING: This technology engraves a code (for example the firearm’s serial number, make, and model) on the firing pin of a semi-automatic firearm. Every time the gun is fired, the firing pin stamps this alphanumeric code on the shell before it is ejected. A microstamped casing recovered at a crime scene will allow law enforcement to identify the gun’s first purchaser and start the investigation process. California requires microstamping in all new models of semiautomatic handguns sold in the state.



NOTES

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EVERYTOWN FOR GUN SAFETY SUPPORT FUND is an independent, non-partisan 501(c)(3) organization working to improve understanding of the causes of gun violence and the means to reduce it by conducting groundbreaking original research, developing evidence-based solutions, and communicating these recommendations to advocates, lawmakers, and the public. Every day 88 Americans are killed with guns, but research shows that common-sense public safety laws can reduce gun violence and save lives.
