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North Carolina earns dismal ranking in continued slide down gun rights rankings

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Once considered a model state for gun rights, North Carolina continues its free fall on national Second Amendment rankings.

A new ranking by the Cato Institute places North Carolina 35th among the states in firearm protections, dropping the state to the bottom 16 nationally. As more states pass constitutional carry while North Carolina clings to an embarrassing pistol permit process from the Jim Crow era, state gun laws no longer reflect the intent of the Bill of Rights.

North Carolina earned its dismal ranking in large part due to its pistol purchase permit law, which was designed in the early 20th century to keep guns out of the hands of African Americans. Only in 2021 did Republicans in the General Assembly pass a bill to repeal the law.

Predictably, Democrat Gov. Roy Cooper vetoed the legislation. Still, Republicans were slow to move on this critical repeal, missing past opportunities under a GOP governor and supermajorities in the legislature.

This outdated, racist, and ineffective law kept many North Carolinians defenseless during 2020, as they feared for their safety amid surging violent crime and the coronavirus pandemic.

Citizens who have a constitutional right to keep and bear arms, often in name only, were left waiting months to obtain permits to purchase guns, and over a year in some cases for the license to carry those guns legally. Ironically, the approval process that often takes sheriffs' departments weeks and months to conduct is the same background check completed in mere minutes at gun stores.

North Carolina's archaic system, which no other state in the Southeast uses and which can be found in only seven other states, is ineffectual at preventing crime but effective in keeping guns out of the hands of law-abiding citizens.

Another reason North Carolina has fared poorly compared to other states is the national trend toward constitutional carry. Twenty-one states currently have constitutional carry, including six states that enacted the popular legislation this year. These states allow anyone who can legally obtain a gun, which involves a federal background check conducted by the FBI, to carry that firearm in lawful places.

This growing number of states recognize that the right to bear arms is an inherent right, not a privilege dictated by burdensome requirements and fees. North Carolina's concealed carry laws require applicants to attend and pass a class (costing around \$75-\$100), present a photo ID (or an equivalent), be fingerprinted (by appointment only), and pay a \$90 application fee. These requirements seem particularly burdensome in a state where courts have deemed voter ID laws unconstitutional. Nevertheless, North Carolina's system does little to prevent crime and instead places obstacles on citizens who desire fully to exercise their constitutional rights.

The near half of the country that now allows constitutional carry understands the inconvenient truth: Someone who is willing to commit a crime with a gun will not be prevented from stuffing that gun in her or his waistband on the way to commit a crime, regardless of any state permitting process. Burdensome permit regimes, especially North Carolina's, punish only those who are law-abiding.

North Carolinians should be skeptical of any limitations on their right to bear arms. Lest we forget, the Second Amendment was intended to do more than provide for self-defense. In America, self-government is the maxim, which is unlike European countries where "governments are afraid to trust the people with arms," as James Madison so aptly noted in Federalist No. 46.

A core function of the Second Amendment is to provide a mechanism for the people's defense against a tyrannical government. The Founders affirmed the right to bear arms as inherent in each free person. After all, governments that want a disarmed populace view the citizenry as not superior to the state, but as mere servants.