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Report Links High Rates of Gun Violence to Weak State Regulations

By: Erica Goode – April 3, 2013

Many states with the weakest gun laws have the worst rates of gun violence, ranking high on numerous indicators, like gun homicides and suicides, firearm deaths of children, and killings of law enforcement officers, according to a report to be issued Wednesday by the liberal Center for American Progress.

Alaska ranked first in overall gun deaths, the report found, with 20.28 deaths per 100,000 people in 2010 — more than twice the national average — followed by Louisiana and Montana, all states that prior analyses have judged to have weak gun laws. Eight of the states with the highest levels of gun violence were among the 25 with the weakest gun laws, the report found.

The report is the second in recent weeks to link gun deaths and firearms laws. Last month, a group of Boston researchers reported online in *JAMA Internal Medicine* that more firearm laws in a state were associated with lower rates of firearm deaths. That study took into account factors like poverty, unemployment, sex and race, education, population density, violent deaths unrelated to firearms and household firearm ownership.

Deborah Azrael, a research scientist at Harvard's School of Public Health who studies firearms and violence, called the latest state-by-state report "a useful collation of data," and said it "reinforces what we know from other studies, which is that the rate of exposure to firearms is associated with overall mortality."

But the report was criticized by opponents of tighter gun laws, who faulted its methodology and said it ignored the beneficial effect of gun ownership in combating crime.

"The real world experience of guns obviously is that they are harmful in the wrong hands and protective in the right hands," said David B. Kopel, an assistant policy analyst at the Cato Institute. "So you want to look at both effects."

He added that high rates of gun violence in states with less gun regulation did not necessarily indicate higher crime rates over all.

"Is Louisiana a low-control state with a lot of crime? Absolutely," he said. "On the other hand, New York and California are clearly dangerous states in comparison to the rest of the country, and they're also very high-control states."

The new report was based on an analysis of data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. In addition to firearm deaths, the report looked at other indicators of gun violence, like aggravated assaults with firearms, the percentage of guns

traced to crimes within two years of their purchase, and the rate at which guns bought in one state are recovered in another after a crime is committed, a measure of illegal gun trafficking.

When all 10 indicators of gun violence were taken into consideration, Louisiana — the state with the highest rate of gun homicides, 9.5 per 100,000 people in 2010, and one of the states with the highest numbers of firearm deaths among children from 2001 to 2010 — ranked as the most violent state. Hawaii had the lowest overall rate of gun violence, followed by Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey and New York, all among the 10 states that an analysis last year by the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence found had the toughest laws.

“Obviously, we know that correlation is not causation necessarily,” said Arkadi Gerney, a fellow at the Center for American Progress and the lead author of the report, “but it suggests that there could be a causal relationship, and there are a lot of reasons to think that there is.”

Some states did not follow the pattern. Vermont, which has relatively weak gun laws, had low rates of gun violence. Maryland, which has relatively strong firearm legislation, had a high level of gun homicides, ranking fifth, with 5.3 per 100,000 people.

Dr. Azrael, of Harvard, noted that the factors that were driving gun violence differed from state to state — in states like Montana and Idaho, for example, the rate of gun suicides greatly outstrips the rate of homicides committed with firearms.

Tightened laws like universal background checks could address the availability of guns to criminals and the spread of trafficked guns across state borders, she said. But understanding more about things like “household decision making about guns and how people weigh the costs and benefits of guns” should also be part of the conversation, she said.