



## ISSUE

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Easy access to firearms by dangerous individuals often leads to community gun violence, suicide, and trauma that create/exacerbate mental health conditions of Texans. While resolving these issues takes a multifaceted approach, a key provision would be to require background checks on all firearm transactions. This could have an impact on reducing suicides, mass shootings, and the resulting community trauma caused by gun violence, as it would prevent unauthorized individuals who fail a background check from legally obtaining firearms.

## RECOMMENDATION

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- Reduce suicides and community trauma caused by dangerous individuals' easy access to firearms by requiring background checks be completed on all firearm transactions, via the federal National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). This would prevent individuals barred from obtaining firearms through licensed gun dealers from bypassing federal law and legally obtaining firearms through unlicensed gun dealers, where criminal background checks are currently not required. Small exceptions for immediate family-to-family transfers could be made.

## BACKGROUND

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Expanded background checks can reduce gun violence and associated trauma in communities.<sup>1</sup> Gun violence exposure impacts community well-being, and chronic exposure leads to anxiety, depression, PTSD, constant agitation, sleep disturbances, hopelessness, and other mental health conditions.<sup>2</sup> Research consistently links this exposure to less healthy and safe communities.<sup>3</sup> Overwhelming evidence suggests that community and other forms of trauma may cause illnesses or aggravate existing conditions.<sup>4</sup> Trauma reaches beyond those who directly witness or experience it, and can lead to a greater need for mental health resources within communities at multiple levels. Preventing this trauma should be a priority in Texas, and closing background check loopholes would be just one step in the process.

Addressing access to lethal means is also vital to reducing suicide. While the average suicide attempt has an 8.5 percent death rate, attempts with firearms have an 89.6 percent mortality rate.<sup>5</sup> When coupled with other policy solutions, closing these loopholes could decrease Texas's suicide rate even further.

In August 2019, a shooting in the Midland-Odessa area of Texas left seven people murdered and 25 others injured.<sup>6</sup> This event has impacted both individual and community mental health in the region, and community members have been treated for anxiety and trauma.<sup>7</sup> The shooter had previously been denied firearms via the NICS due to a failed background check.<sup>8</sup> However he was able to acquire his AR-15 style weapon via a private transfer, meaning he did not need to complete a background check to obtain the firearm.<sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup> Had unlicensed dealers been required to conduct background checks before transferring a firearm, it is possible that the shooter would have never possessed the weapon. This could have potentially saved seven lives and the collective trauma that ensued.

## SUMMARY

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Expanded background checks could help prevent gun violence that spurs trauma in Texas communities.<sup>11</sup> By closing loopholes, the state can reduce community violence and associated trauma that fosters/perpetuates mental health issues of Texans.

## CONTACT

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## CITATIONS

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