

One response to coronavirus anxiety in Mass.: try to buy a gun for the first time

By [Matt Stout](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 14, 2020, 5:54 p.m.



Bill Biewenga and his partner, Laurie Warner, were unnerved in recent months by a report of a burglary in their neighborhood and then, in the last few weeks of already heightened tension, people walking across their property abutting a wooded area of the Cape Cod National Seashore. They tried to buy a gun, but couldn't. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Bill Biewenga said he had considered buying a gun for years. A former US Marine, the 72-year-old had been in rifle club in high school, and about 18 months ago, he and his partner, Laurie Warner, even applied for and received their firearm licenses.

But it wasn't until the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic that he actually decided to try to buy one.

"We're not radical wing nuts," said Biewenga, who contacted a Hyannis gun shop this month about buying a Mossberg 590M 12-gauge shotgun and ammunition. "But we do believe in being prepared."

As COVID-19 has upended everyone's day-to-day routines, anxiety has rushed to fill the void, be it fear of losing one's job or [stockpiling toilet paper](#). Even in Massachusetts, home to some of the nation's strictest firearm laws, others say they're weighing something else: whether to buy — or trying to buy — a gun for the first time in this uneasy reality.

Less than 17 percent of Massachusetts residents who responded to a recent [Suffolk University/Boston Globe](#) poll said they owned a gun. But of those who don't, about 1 in 7 said they now wish they did.

"You just start thinking about some of the worst case scenarios," said Keith Haddad, a 33-year-old Everett resident and poll respondent who said he's researched the state's firearm application process. "Who would have thought that a virus would shut down the whole world? And if this is possible, what else is?"

"What happens if you do need to protect yourself?" Haddad added. "A gun wouldn't hurt."

That new focus on firearms comes at a thorny time. A state order designed to slow the spread of the virus has closed gun shops, among other businesses statewide, and has drawn [a legal challenge](#) from gun retailers, advocacy groups, and others who say it steps on prospective owners' constitutional rights.

Meanwhile, gun violence prevention groups have warned that having more guns in the home, especially as parents and children remain huddled inside, carries its own risks, including the prospect of accidental shootings.

That hasn't stopped an surge in interest more broadly.

Monthly background checks for guns hit a seven-year high in Massachusetts in March, federal data show, providing an important, if imperfect, barometer of sales that has reached record-setting levels nationally. As of the end of last month, March 20 saw more checks performed than any day since the federal government began tracking such data more than two decades ago; then, on March 21, there were the fourth most.

In Massachusetts – one of three so-called “[license to own](#)” states, where a person must have a valid license to legally possess a gun – checks topped 23,500 in March, the highest since March 2013 and roughly 3,000 more than the previous March.

The number of active licenses in Massachusetts also had jumped by nearly 22,000 between January and April, pushing the total in the state past 464,000, according to state data.

The data, while illustrative, come with big caveats: Statistics on background checks, for example, don't specify how many are for return buyers. And the state's license process can span weeks, meaning many applications likely flowed in before the pandemic hit.

The process of actually buying a gun in Massachusetts, meanwhile, is facing new friction, both real and political.

As part of the state's efforts to stem the COVID-19's spread, Governor Charlie Baker's last month ordered a variety of “nonessential” businesses to close, including gun dealers. When he revised the order a week later, his administration temporarily included firearm retailers among those that could open, in line with newly amended federal guidelines.

But the Republican governor's office reversed course within hours, reportedly [at the urging](#) of House Speaker [Robert A. DeLeo](#), a Democrat. It frustrated leadership at the Gun Owners Action League, the local National Rifle Association chapter that was already unhappy that Baker excluded gun retailers from a \$10 million loan fund for small businesses.

“I believe we made the right decision,” Baker said Friday of the ban on gun retailers, though he declined to address it further. “I don’t speak to questions that are currently before the court.”

Attorney General Maura Healey, a Democrat who years earlier banned the [sale of so-called copycat assault weapons](#) in Massachusetts, weighed in, writing on Twitter that retailers and shooting ranges “are NOT essential businesses during a public health emergency.”

Then last week, a coalition including gun shops and advocacy groups [sued Baker in federal court](#) in a bid to allow shuttered firearm dealers to legally reopen.

The plaintiffs include Biewenga, who said he was told by representatives at Cape Cod Gun Works on April 3 that they couldn’t sell him a gun because of the ban. Biewenga and Warner said they were unnerved in recent months by a report of a burglary in their neighborhood and then, in the last few weeks of already heightened tension, people walking across their property abutting a wooded area of the Cape Cod National Seashore.

“It’s semi-secluded, and if you were going to pick a place out you wanted to rob, this would probably be the place,” Biewenga said of their home tucked at the end of a cul-de-sac.

Others in the lawsuit raised similar concerns. Michael McCarthy, a Boston resident and plaintiff, sought to buy a gun for the first time out of fears he would be “unable to protect himself and his family should the need arise and emergency services are unavailable,” according to the lawsuit.

Gun control advocates, however, have cautioned against the embrace of guns amid coronavirus fears.

“The fact is: a gun is not going to protect you from coronavirus,” said Jonathan Lowy, chief counsel for Brady, a gun violence prevention group. “However, a gun is going to