

IMPACT County Agency Website Analysis: Access to Pertinent Pistol Permit Information

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Introduction

This is the second working paper in an ongoing study of firearms related issues in New York State. This paper focuses on issues of handgun ownership and the pistol permit process through a review of information available on New York county websites. We plan to follow up with this working paper by surveying the county officials which oversee the permit process. For that we will inquire about a variety of processes related to the permit process including how counties address stolen guns or the guns of deceased permit holders.

This paper will describe the methods employed to find information about pistol permits from counties in New York State. It will then show a table of the information found. A discussion of the trends found in the table will follow. At its end, this paper will offer discussion for policy implications and future investigation of information surrounding firearms and pistol permits in New York State.

The Data

For this analysis, we examined official web pages of Impact counties in New York State. Those are Albany, Broome, Chautauqua, Dutchess, Erie, Monroe, Nassau, Niagara, Oneida, Onondaga, Orange, Rensselaer, Rockland, Schenectady, Suffolk, Ulster, and Westchester Counties. These seventeen counties receive funding from the New York Department of Criminal Justice Services for focused crime reduction strategies and were targeted because of their relative size, crime rate, and potential for collaborative action.

As New York State law is vague as to who should keep records regarding firearm permits, both County Clerks Offices and County Sheriffs Departments share the burden of handling firearm information. As such, both of these sources were examined for this project.

For this project we looked to see if the county agencies listed information about:

- How to apply for a pistol permit
- Any fees that might be associated with permit applications or changes
- If any forms could be downloaded
- How to register a handgun
- How to remove a handgun
- Steps to be taken if a permit holder dies
- Steps to be taken if a handgun is stolen
- Steps to be taken if a permit holder changes residence
- If forms or applications could be completed online

The table of findings is listed below.

Findings

A few trends appeared from the data. Firstly, there is significant variation in the types of information found on the agency websites. A handful of counties, in particular Erie, Onondaga, and Ulster counties, list numerous pertinent firearm ownership and pistol permit items. Others offer little, or in the case of Nassau, Niagara, and Schenectady counties no, easily accessible information regarding firearm ownership or pistol permits.

New York IMPACT counties vary in terms of which agency keeps information regarding firearms. Some counties, such as Albany, Erie, Rensselaer, Rockland, Monroe, and Westchester counties, had the majority of their firearm information on county clerks websites. Alternately, in Broome, Chautauqua, Dutchess, Onondaga, and Suffolk counties the sheriff's departments' websites contained the majority of firearm related information. Only on the Orange and Ulster County's websites was there a balance of information found on both agencies' websites.

The most frequently listed piece of firearm related information is how to apply for a pistol permit. Fourteen of the seventeen IMPACT counties had this information listed on either the county clerk's website or the sheriff's department website. The three least listed pieces of pertinent information was information about if residents could submit application forms online, information about what actions to take if a handgun is stolen, and information about what actions to take if a pistol permit holder dies. Zero, two, and four of the seventeen IMPACT counties listed these items, respectfully.

Policy Issues

As was discussed in the previous section, there was some variation between which agency carried the counties' firearm information amongst IMPACT counties. This might be interpreted to show which agency in these counties handles pertinent firearm related information and tasks required by residents. If this is the case, it might create some logistical problems when trying to implement state-wide firearm policies. Both county clerks' offices and sheriffs departments should be included in any such policy consideration.

As was discussed in the first working paper in this series (# 121 "Recommendations for Addressing the Problem of Illegal Transfer of Guns, including Straw Purchases in Monroe County, New York), research suggests that the distribution of important firearm ownership information can help reduce the unlawful transfer and theft of firearms that eventually become crime guns. Specifically, distributing information about steps to be taken if a firearm is stolen or if a pistol permit holder becomes deceased are simple strategies that could reduce the number of lawfully possessed firearms that are at risk of becoming crime guns in the future. Considering the dearth of information regarding these two topics on county websites, four of the seventeen counties' websites contained information about deceased permit holders or stolen handguns, this is an area of potential concern for New York States' IMPACT counties. However, this is an area that can be immediately addressed with the addition of this information on county agency websites.

Next Steps

The next set of working papers in this series will investigate further the information which New York State counties store regarding pistol permits. This information will be shared with the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services for further policy discussions regarding the illegal transfers of firearms and firearm violence. A process of interviews with County Clerk's Offices will be conducted to determine the level of understanding that each individual county has for firearm related issues.

Information found on county agency websites may also act as a proxy for the depth of understanding that each county has regarding various firearm issues. However, further research must be done to determine if this is accurate. The process of interviews described above should help to this end.