

*Automated Record Checks for Firearm  
Purchasers: Issues and Options*

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**A**UTOMATED  
RECORD CHECKS OF  
FIREARM PURCHASERS:  
ISSUES AND OPTIONS



CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES  
OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT

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# Foreword


About 70 million Americans own an estimated 200 million firearms. All but a few are law-abiding citizens who use firearms for hunting, sports shooting, gun collections, and self protection. This report focuses on automated checks of criminal records to identify the small percentage of persons who are prohibited from purchasing firearms under Federal law because they have been charged or convicted of a disqualifying offense or are fugitives from justice.

Perhaps one-third of the most violent crimes involve the use of firearms. Most of these crimes are committed by repeat offenders who are legally prohibited from purchasing or possessing firearms. The firearm purchaser record check will not necessarily keep firearms from the hands of determined criminals, but it can make it tougher for criminals to obtain firearms from licensed gun dealers.

Our report assesses the proposals and prospects for automated checks, ranging from the point-of-sale "instant" check now used by the State of Virginia, to the establishment of a computerized national felons file, to live scanning of fingerprints, or the issuance of 'smart' cards to identify firearm purchasers. It considers the benefits, costs, and risks of automated checks. The report examines the relationship between automated record checks and waiting periods, the wide variability in State criminal record systems, and the challenges of improving the automation and quality of record systems.

This study was requested by Sen. Howard Metzenbaum, Chairman, Subcommittee on Antitrust, Monopolies, and Business Rights, Senate Committee on the Judiciary.

OTA benefited from discussion at an April 1991 OTA workshop, comments on earlier drafts by many firearm and criminal record experts, and prior reports on this topic prepared by or for the U.S. Department of Justice, OTA appreciates the assistance of the Federal Bureau of Investigation; Bureau of Justice Statistics; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; State and local law enforcement and criminal justice agencies; and groups representing gun owners, dealers, manufacturers, and others concerned with the use, regulation, and distribution of firearms in the United States. The report is, however, solely the responsibility of OTA and not of those who assisted us.

  
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# **Automated Record Checks of Firearm Purchasers: Issues and Options**

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NOTE: OTA appreciates and is grateful for the valuable assistance and thoughtful critiques provided by the workshop participants. The workshop participants do not, however, necessarily approve, disapprove, or endorse this report. OTA assumes full responsibility for the report and the accuracy of its contents.

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