

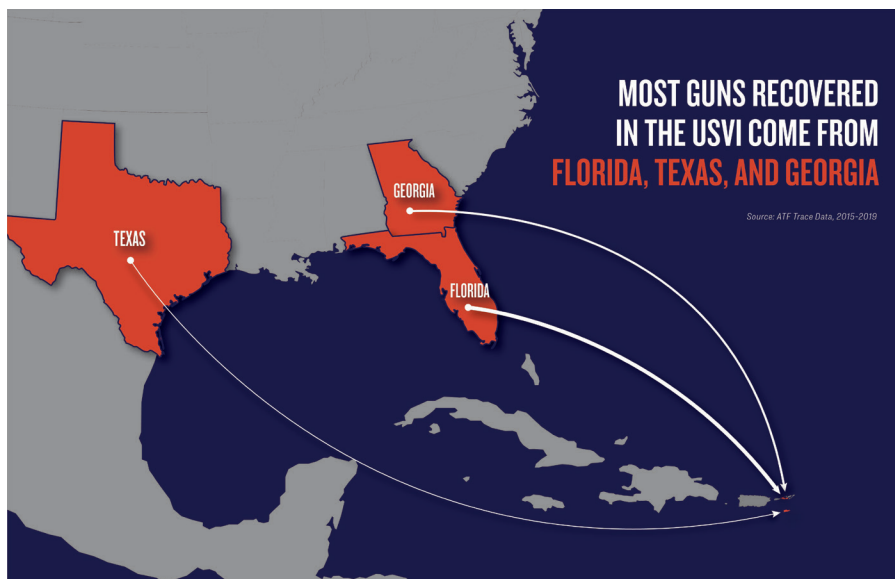
# GUN VIOLENCE IN THE US TERRITORIES

Gun violence is a uniquely American problem—and it's only getting worse. More than 45,000 Americans died from gun violence in 2020. Yet some of the highest levels of gun violence occur not in the 50 states, but in two US territories: Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands (USVI).

**Much of this gun violence is fueled by firearms trafficked in from states with weak gun laws. We must take immediate action to address the gun violence epidemic in these territories.**



## US VIRGIN ISLANDS



### State of Gun Violence

In 2016, the gun homicide rate in the USVI was nearly three times that of the highest state, Louisiana.

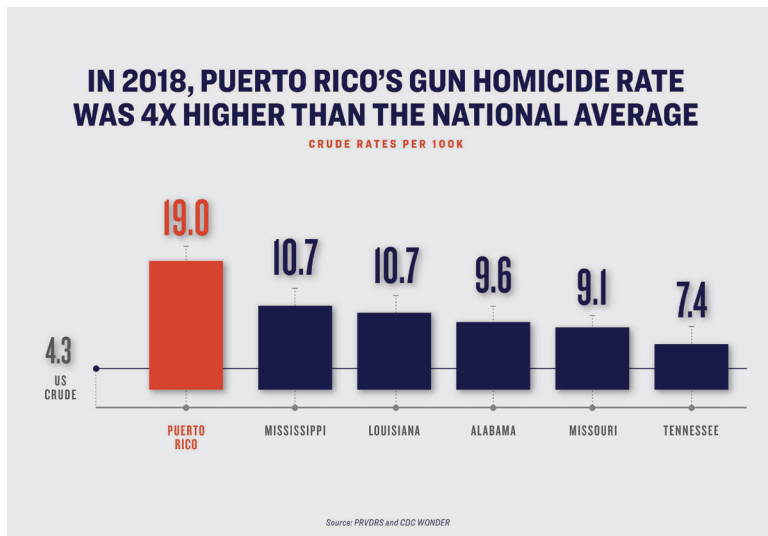
### Trafficking

In the USVI, legal guns are bought and sold at among the lowest rates of all states and territories. Yet in 2020, the USVI was the second leading importer of firearms recovered by law enforcement. The states that traffic most firearms into the USVI are Florida, Georgia, and Texas, all of which have lax gun laws.

### Gun Laws

The US Virgins Islands require residents to obtain a license through the police commissioner in order to possess a firearm or ammunition. While licensing schemes have proven effective in the few US states that have them, the policies in the USVI are severely undermined by high rates of gun trafficking.

# PUERTO RICO



## State of Gun Violence

The firearm homicide rate in Puerto Rico was four times higher than that of the 50 states in 2018 (the last year for which data is available).

## Trafficking

As in the USVI, the majority of firearms recovered by law enforcement were not originally sold in the archipelago. Most of the guns that come into Puerto Rico do so via mail or commercial airline flights. The states that traffic most firearms into Puerto Rico are the same as the USVI: Florida, Georgia, and Texas.

## Gun Laws

Residents are required to obtain a permit to purchase, possess, carry, or operate firearms and ammunition. In 2020, the NRA lobbied for and Puerto Rico passed a new law weakening the territory's licensing scheme. Firearms regulations have also been undercut by high levels of firearms trafficking and use of illegal guns in the archipelago.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations, made in conjunction with key stakeholders, represent actions that the federal and state governments can take to prevent gun violence and save lives.

- 1 Create Systems to Monitor Gun Violence in All US Territories**

As Giffords Law Center discovered in the course of conducting research, none of the US territories have easily accessible, up-to-date, and consistently released data on gun deaths. In order to address gun violence in the US territories, adequate public health monitoring systems must be established to measure the scope and nature of the problem.
- 2 Increase Funding for Community Violence Intervention Programs**

As in the 50 states, gun violence in these two US territories concentrates in large, urban areas such as San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico. Local community violence intervention programs, like Taller Salud in Loíza, have shown tremendous success in reducing gun violence. The federal government should commit funds to implement and expand programs like Taller Salud.
- 3 Encourage States to Better Regulate Their Gun Markets**

The trafficking of guns from the 50 states into the USVI and Puerto Rico is one of the main drivers of gun violence in both places. The federal government and state governments—especially those in Florida, Georgia, and Texas—must work together to regulate local gun markets and stop gun trafficking from the states into these territories.
- 4 Finalize ATF Rule on Ghost Guns**

ATF recently proposed a new rule that would change the definition of a firearm to include components that are intentionally left unfinished, which would help reduce the influx of unserialized, untraceable firearms in both the USVI and Puerto Rico. The ATF rule must become policy as soon as possible so that these guns do not continue to fuel gun violence in the territories.

The American gun violence epidemic continues to rage on, even in places that are too often left out of the conversation. Advocates and courageous legislators must take action to save lives in Puerto Rico and the USVI, both of which suffer from staggeringly high rates of gun violence. **Gun violence is not an intractable problem, and the status quo is not acceptable.** We know what the solutions are—now it's time to enact them.