

In Texas, guns are everywhere, whether concealed or in the open



By [Molly Hennessy-Fiske](#)

September 26, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

NEW BRAUNFELS, Tex. — To live in Texas is to live surrounded by guns.

Each morning, men here strap guns inside suits, boots and swim trunks. Women slip them into bra and bellyband holsters that render them invisible. They stash firearms in purses, tool boxes, portable gun safes, back seats and glove compartments.

Neighbors tuck guns into bedside tables, cars and trucks. They take guns fishing, to church, the park, the pool, the gym, the movies — even to protests at the state Capitol. The convention center hosts gun shows where shoppers peruse [AR-15s](#) and high-capacity magazines outlawed in other states. Texas billboards offer an endless stream of advertisements for ammunition, silencers and other accessories.

It has been legal here to openly carry long guns like rifles for generations. But Texas's gun-friendly attitude isn't just a relic of the Old West and ranching: Many restrictions on handguns were loosened only recently. Two years ago, state lawmakers gave those 21 and older the right to carry handguns without a permit; in 2015, they gave those with concealed handgun permits the right to carry on public college campuses.

Two years earlier, Texas lawmakers responded to the Sandy Hook school shooting in Connecticut by allowing public school staff with concealed handgun permits to arm themselves. After the 2022 school shooting in Uvalde, Tex., by a gunman using an AR-15-style rifle he bought within days of turning 18, a state House committee passed a proposal to raise the age to buy, lease or receive certain semiautomatic rifles from 18 to 21. But the House rejected the proposal and the legislature instead passed a law requiring armed security at every school and mental health training for some district staff.

Unlike California and some other blue states, Texas has no state firearm sales registry, no required waiting period to buy a gun, no red flag law guarding against the mentally ill or violent having weapons, no restrictions on the size of ammunition magazines and no background checks for guns purchased in a private sale.

While a majority of Americans favor stricter gun laws and say it's too easy to obtain a gun, many Texans see guns as a solution to the problem, not the problem itself.

Without their weapons, more than two dozen gun owners said in interviews, they feel nervous. They worry about crime, after a spike in murders during the pandemic, even though rates of homicide and other serious crimes are largely down this year in the United States. They also say they worry about government overreach and societal collapse.

They take solace in knowing that they are armed and that someone else around them likely is, too; some relish spotting the telltale imprint of a concealed gun.

"It's part of being Texan," said Will Moravits, 45, a seventh-generation Texan who teaches at nearby Texas State University and carries his Sig Sauer handgun daily.

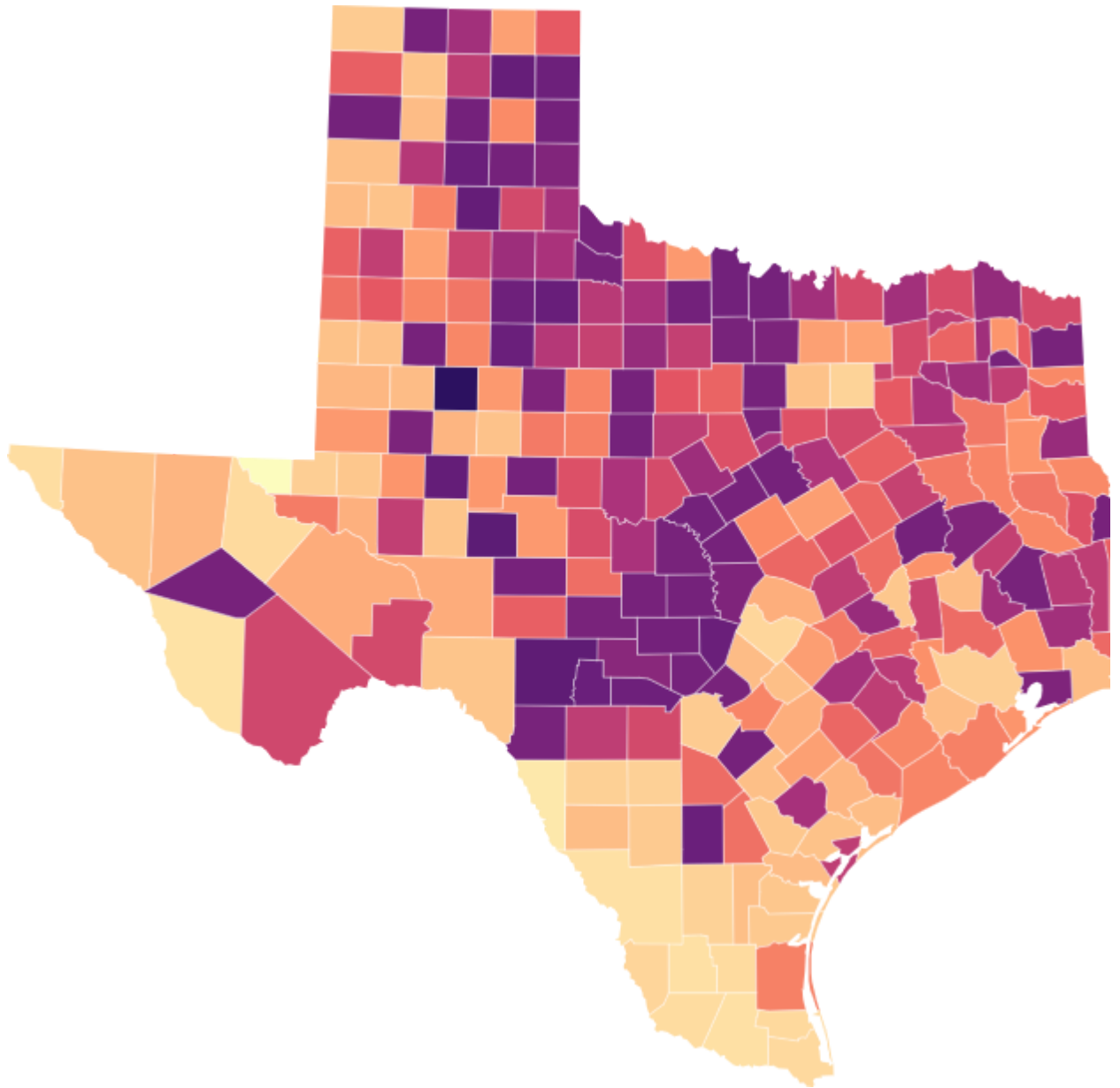
Texans have purchased about 5.8 million firearms since 2020, more than any other state, according to a Washington Post estimate based on federal background checks. Last year, the rate at which Texans purchased guns was nearly double that of California, according to the estimates.

Texas's guns are concentrated in conservative rural areas and suburban pockets like New Braunfels, with fewer guns per capita in more urban areas that trend Democratic like Austin, Dallas and Houston. But experts said it's difficult to estimate how many guns there are overall in Texas, because the state requires less documentation of gun sales than others.

The attraction to guns by many of the state's 30 million residents has grown not despite the state's increased numbers of mass killings but because of them, according to gun owners.

Handgun license applications in Texas

Between September 2021 and 2022 per 1,000 residents.



Source: Texas Department of Public Safety

THE WASHINGTON PI

Data tracked by [the Associated Press](#), [USA Today](#) and [Northeastern University](#) show the state suffered six mass killings by guns in 2022, and four more so far in 2023. (In their data, “mass killings” are defined as those with four or more fatalities, not including the gunman.) Texas has had the most mass killings of any state from 2015 to this year, 30 in total. The next highest state is California, which with about 9 million more residents had 27 total mass killings.

In few places is the dominance of firearms more evident than in this Central Texas city of 105,000 about 35 miles northeast of San Antonio. New Braunfels was founded by German immigrants in 1845 at the confluence of the Comal and Guadalupe rivers. Settlers started a schuetzen verein, or shooting club, now among the oldest in the United States.

New Braunfels includes one of the top urban Zip codes in Texas for new handgun licenses per capita last year: About 213 per 10,000 people, according to state records; overall, the surrounding county had 155 permits issued per 10,000 people.

By contrast, most San Francisco-area counties had issued fewer than six concealed handgun licenses per 10,000 residents since 2012, according to the most recent California Department of Justice data from last year, although applications surged late in the year following a U.S. Supreme Court ruling against local restrictions in New York, and California lawmakers responded earlier this month by passing a law that further restricts who can receive a permit.

New Braunfels is the seat of Comal County, which then-President Donald Trump won with about 71 percent of the vote in 2020, and where yard signs proclaim “Biden is the wurst” and “We don’t call 911.” But not all gun owners are Republicans or Trump supporters. Some say they’re libertarian, moderate, nonvoters, or liberals who voted for President Biden or lean left on social issues.

Moravits, a Republican precinct chair, voted for Trump twice and hopes to vote for him again. His Sig Sauer 1911 .45 caliber Texas edition handgun features a lone star emblazoned on the grip and the state outline engraved on the slide. Gun brand loyalties here are akin to affection for pickups: some favor Sig Sauer, others are Glock or “Colt for life.”

Moravits replaced his AR-15 with an AR-10, which fires larger ammunition, but still wears AR-15 “Come and Take It” t-shirts. His Ford Explorer has a sticker on the back with the word “Love” spelled out in weapons. The “L” is a handgun. The “E” is an AR.

Guns are so commonplace that they can slip Texans’ minds. Sitting at Moravits’s ranch house on the city’s historically Latino west side, Hector Rosales, Moravits’s brother-in-law, at first said he wasn’t a gun owner. Then he thought again.

“I do have a handgun — I forgot!” he said, later extracting a .22 Beretta in a zippered bag from a cabinet in his bedroom. Rosales, 59, a spice distributor and nonvoter, also has an old rifle, a .223 Remington. He said his parents, longtime Democrats, have two.

“You’re not taking it to the movies?” Rosales asked Moravits as he left recently for an early showing of “Haunted Mansion.”

Of course, Moravits said, slipping his Sig Sauer into a holster at the small of his back. “Don’t you remember Aurora?” He meant Aurora, Colo., where a gunman killed a dozen people in a movie theater in 2012.

Moravits grew up in Uvalde, about 115 miles southwest, and said he knew a teacher who was among 21 people killed at the school shooting there last year. Five years earlier, a gunman drove 35 miles south from his New Braunfels home to a church in Sutherland Springs, where he fatally shot 26 people before being chased off by a neighbor with an AR-15. It was the deadliest mass shooting in Texas and at a U.S. house of worship.

“If something goes down, I’m going to try to protect people,” Moravits said. “ ... Guns are a great equalizer.”

Moravits said he wears his gun for the same reason he wears a seat belt: It might save his life. He isn’t alone: Many New Braunfels gun owners said they fear they can’t depend on police to arrive in time to protect them.

Kenneth Wells, 63, a retired pilot and Air Force veteran, supports some gun laws, such as requiring background checks for all purchases. But he opposes many others, including government gun registries, waiting periods for purchases, restrictions on AR-15s like the one he owns or red-flag laws designed to prevent the mentally ill from buying guns.

“The hysteria over AR-15s and assault-style weapons, that this is what’s causing the mass shootings, I just don’t buy that,” Wells said after he removed his AR-15 from a closet gun safe at his home in a New Braunfels development. “If assault-style weapons were not out there, I believe people would resort to other means.”

Several New Braunfels gun owners said they quietly refuse to disarm in gun-free zones, including restaurants, churches and the local rec center, Das Rec. Moravits said he notices concealed weapons at his Catholic church.

With so many guns around, New Braunfels has also suffered the kind of shootings that are more statistically common than mass killings, such as violent crimes and suicides. On Aug. 4, a woman killed herself with a gun in her car outside a Catholic church. Last year, a 38-year-old man shot and injured his 22-year-old neighbor in a Christmas Eve dispute. In 2020, a mother turned her handgun on her two children, ages 10 and 16, then herself.

So many here carry a gun daily that a gun store called EDC TX (Everyday Carry Texas) opened next to City Hall.

“They’d never let you do that in California,” said owner Tunis Lopez, 53, as he strapped on his Glock 19X 9mm pistol and prepared to open. He moved here four years ago from the Bay Area with his wife, who packs a 9mm in her purse.

Dawn Rose, 48, sat at her kitchen table across from the family’s glossy maroon, 6-foot tall gun safe. It was big enough to fit more than a dozen guns including ARs they use to hunt hogs.

Every morning, Rose, a federal defense health agency contractor, dons her Sig Sauer P365 9mm and fastens her earrings before she heads to work. Once a week, she slips a tiny subcompact pistol into a bellyband holster under her leggings to walk with a friend. On Thursdays, she wears her handgun to an indoor shooting range for target practice with her father.

An Air Force veteran and mother who lives in the New Braunfels suburb of Cibolo, Rose has had to run home to drop her gun off before fetching her son from high school or visiting a nearby base's PX or clinic — all gun-free zones.

"You have to really think when you're walking out to do your errands," she said.

Some gun owners are law enforcement and active duty service members required to work with firearms. But many others, like Rose, also work armed: doctors, teachers, pastors, construction workers and guards at the gated developments constantly expanding the edge of town as rooftops replace ranches.

Couples and families often go shooting or gun shopping. Others invite newcomers to shoot at local Dietz Gun Shop & Range, family ranches or gun clubs, from modern ones like A Girl & A Gun, which Rose helps lead, to the 174-year-old New Braunfels Schuetzen Verein.

"I learned to shoot out here," Clifford Dietz said at his family ranch near where the shooting club held a recent competition.

Dietz, 89, was wearing a pearl snap Western shirt and Wranglers ironed to a crease, and standing in front of the range's sign, "Where friendly shooters gather." He didn't need ear protection to dampen the muted "pop" of the club's .22 rifles. Louder shots erupted from Dietz's range next door, where visitors fired pistols and AR-15s.

The club's 60 members have diversified over time, longtime members said, growing to include more women and minorities.

Comal Pawn sells mostly handguns and hunting rifles, advertising guns on its sign, building and business cards.

"Come deer season, there won't be but one or two shotguns left there. Pistols are kind of a year-round thing," said owner Danny Scheel.

Scheel, 77, is a former county judge, a New Braunfels native who remembers when the high school used to close the first day of deer hunting season. He drove his pickup to class with a rifle in a rack. Now he hunts hogs with an AR-15.

"My grandkids like to go out and have fun with it," he said.

Standing nearby, Scheel's employee Toni Barboza Gaytan, 61, wasn't raised with guns, but bought a 9mm Sig Sauer from the shop after she started working there three years ago. She keeps it loaded at her bedside. When her soldier son-in-law deployed, she called her daughter to ensure she still had their Glock for protection. She did.

Will Jackson, a firearms instructor who started Gladiator Gunz Training Group in 2017, moved his family from Bowie, Md., to New Braunfels three years ago in part due to Texas's permissive gun laws. Like many here, Jackson, 47, has AR-15s he uses for hunting, target shooting and home defense, as well as other guns "everywhere."

"There's a gun always accessible. I'm a firm believer it needs to be within arm's reach," said Jackson, a 20-year Army veteran who served in Afghanistan and Iraq. "Not that we live in a bad neighborhood or anything like that. It's just, I don't want to ever be in a situation where I need it and I can't get to it."

He worries about mass shootings, armed home invasions and disasters. "When it crumbles, I'm going to stand on my own and defend my family," he said.

Last September, Jackson said, he was checking his mail, unarmed, when his 15-year-old daughter Leila texted that her high school had been locked down after a student was reported to have a gun. Jackson sped to the school. As parents of the roughly 1,950 students milled outside, upset and many of them armed, Jackson felt helpless.

"Every parent who showed up had a knife or a gun," he said, including a man carrying a handgun who talked about rushing the school. "They were ready. We were not going to have another Uvalde."

But there actually was no shooter. Police later charged a 15-year-old with making a false report.

"Had there been gunshots, it would have been mass chaos because everybody was coming with a firearm," Jackson said of the scene. He said he realizes there are risks to having so many people armed at a site like that.

"Texas gives you your freedom, but it's kind of like the wild West," he said.

But his lasting impression after the lockdown was gratitude for guns. He has since made sure to always carry his handgun. His favorite is a Staccato 2011 9mm, more delicate than a Glock, although he owns some of those, too.

As he marinated chicken to grill in his kitchen, Jackson wore his Staccato pistol holstered inside his shorts; he'd hidden another nearby.

"My personal belief is I'm in Texas, everyone's got a gun. If you don't, what's wrong with you?"

Andrew Ba Tran contributed to this report.