

Firearm Basics



When discussing gun violence and gun violence prevention, it is important to have background knowledge about firearms.

A Brief prepared by the UConn ARMS Center

What is a firearm?

The Gun Control Act defines a firearm as “any weapon which is designed to, or may readily be converted to, expel a projectile by the action of an explosive; the frame or receiver of any such weapon; any firearm muffler or firearm silencer; or any destructive device.”

What are the different types of firearms?

There are two basic kinds of firearms: handguns and long guns. Short or hand-held firearms (handguns) are designed to be aimed and fired with the action of one hand. Long or shoulder fired firearms (long guns) are designed to be used and fired from the hip or shoulder with the action of both hands.

Pistols: a short or hand-held firearm designed for semi-automatic operation.

Revolvers: a short or hand-held firearm with a revolving cylinder manually loaded with cartridges.

Shotguns: a shoulder-fired long gun with one or two unrifled barrels, usually designed to shoot many small projectiles.

Rifles: a shoulder-fired long gun, with a series of spiral grooves cut inside the barrel causing projectile to spin.

Assault rifle: subcategory of rifles that is fully automatic.

Sub-machine gun: hand-held, lightweight short barreled machine gun consisting of handgun-type cartridges and fired from the hand, hip or shoulder.

Machine gun: a firearm that is capable of full automatic firing and that fires rifle ammunition.

What are the different components of a firearm?

Ammunition: ammunition or cartridge cases, primers, bullets, or propellant powder designed for use in any firearm.

- **Round:** the whole cartridge, which contains gunpowder and is ignited by a primer situated in the base of most ammunition.
- **Bullet:** a specific part of the round that flies down the barrel and at target.
- **Caliber:** identifies one size of ammunition versus another and is generally defined by diameter of the casing.
- **Casing:** housing that holds all the components of the round together.
- **Shell/shotshell:** shotgun ammunition (several pellets sprayed out in a larger zone)

Magazine: a detachable container with ammunition

Stock: the part of the firearm that extends back towards your shoulder, with a “butt” on the end where it makes contact with your body.

Barrel: the portion from where the unfired bullet sits through the muzzle opening where it flies out.

Chamber: the spot where an unfired but loaded bullet sits.

Hammer, striker, and firing pin: the pieces that strike the cartridge primer, igniting the gunpowder.

Sights: a device used to line up the muzzle with the shooter’s eye so that they can hit the target.

Rails: parts of the frame that allow for the attachment of accessories.

Magazine Well: where the magazine slides and clicks into.

Grip: where you hold the firearm with your dominant hand. A foregrip is an accessory or part of the frame in front of the trigger where you place your off hand for added stability.

Suppressor: a firearm accessory that reduces the overall noise from a firearm.

What are the different actions of a firearm?

Single Shot: Fires a single round from the barrel for every depression of the trigger; requires manual reloading of the barrel after each shot.

Repeating: Fires a single round from the barrel for every depression of the trigger; requires a repetitive action for the reloading of the barrel after each shot.

Semi-automatic: Fires a single bullet with each pull of the trigger and has a reloading feature that moves a new cartridge into the chamber after the prior cartridge is ejected.

Burst: Fires a small set of rounds for every depression of the trigger, and automatically cycles between rounds with each trigger pull (self-loading).

Full-automatic: Fires continually upon a depression of the trigger, until the trigger is released; automatically cycles between rounds (self-loading).