



# Pennsylvania Gunsmith School®

## The Need for Gunsmiths Analysis by PGS Staff October 2021

PGS was originally founded to train veterans returning from World War II in need of employment. Although the school's size has varied throughout the years, PGS has experienced continuing interest in the school's program, accompanied by a corresponding healthy demand for qualified Gunsmiths.

With a current placement rate of 72.5% (29 of 40 available graduates placed in the field for students enrolling between 4/1/2018 to 3/31/2019), PGS can confirm through both PGS career services activities and independent research on the firearm industry that there is a strong need for graduates of our Master Gunsmithing Program. PGS cannot guaranty employment of graduates.

Mrs. Bergman, our career services director, continues to receive requests from gunshops, manufacturers, sporting good stores, shooting ranges and other employers for Gunsmiths. PGS receives calls on a regular basis from employers, some of whom also visit PGS for on-site interviews.

PGS graduates who are independent gunsmiths report to us that their businesses continue to have substantial gun work. PGS also fields regular calls from the general public, looking for a gunsmith in their area.

Students at PGS are trained to repair, refurbish, restore, modify, accurize (increase accuracy) and customize long guns (rifles and shotguns) and handguns. At the top of their skill sets, they design and build custom firearms from major components (barrel blank, wood blank and serialized action: long guns; frames and slides: handguns), adding special touches such as scopes, adjustable cheek pieces and checkering.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (Occupational Outlook Handbook) does not break out Gunsmithing in its occupation outlook data. Since there is no national gun registry in the U.S., PGS has utilized several different sources such as the Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), FBI, Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence, National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) and other sources to research gun ownership and firearm industry statistics, and socio-economic trends to provide evidence of the needs for Gunsmiths in the U.S.

The analysis of the need for Gunsmiths in this report is conducted against the backdrop of two of the most unprecedented years in our nation's history. The state of the firearm industry and corresponding need for Gunsmiths has been greatly impacted by COVID, and the social and political landscape. The COVID lockdowns and the civil unrest, while creating serious challenges for our country, have created a great increase in the opportunities for those in the Gunsmithing career field.

One of these reasons is the sheer increase in the number of firearms sold and number of new gun owners in the United States – whether due to concerns over firearm ownership, personal safety or business theft and damage.



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### Industry and Gunsmithing Insights

Gunsmiths are critical to the firearms industry. As Tim Barker wrote in a Shooting Industry article, *The In-House Gunsmith*, “Think of a world without auto mechanics. Automakers would churn out new cars, with no one there to fix them when they break. Certainly, some of us could handle minor repairs and maintenance. But what happens when things get serious?”

With millions of firearms to clean, refurbish, maintain and repair, “that’s a lot of potential business,” said Gene Kelly, President of the American Gunsmithing Institute (video based courses). “Further there are endless opportunities for refinishing, trigger jobs, accurizing and accessories,” he added.

Gunsmithing services are sought for firearms at all price points. Original owners of fine Italian shotguns made by Caesar Guerini are automatically enrolled in the PitStop Program, an annual offering (up to three times) to tune-up and service the firearm to “assure maximum performance from your firearm.” Like many major manufacturers, they also maintain a custom shop requiring the high level services of a Gunsmith to do extras like rust bluing, leather covered recoil pads and engraving. (gueriniusa.com)

Bill Wilson, owner of Wilson Combat in Arkansas, says there’s also a market for custom work on guns in the \$500 range. “I keep two guys busy all the time. It’s still shocking to me people are willing to spend \$2000-3000 on a plastic gun,” he said in the Barker-authored article.

Firearm component part makers like Shaw Barrels in Bridgeville, PA and Krieger Barrels Inc. in Richfield, WI are typical of the barrel manufacturers that offer custom services requiring the skills of a Gunsmith, like re-barreling, barrel fitting and chambering, and accurizing, skills all taught at PGS.

Unlike an automobile, firearms are highly durable goods that are built to last for years, writes Aaron Smith in a 7/2/21 article for forbes.com. “But guns won’t last forever without maintenance. Much of that is beyond the skills of the average gun owner.”

Because of the booming firearm industry, Gunsmiths are especially in demand right now. “I’ve been looking for one for three years,” said Hillary Dube, co-owner of HNR Gunworks in Inverness, Florida, in the forbes.com article.

John Buol, editor of American Gunsmith, said “Gunsmiths typically make an annual income of \$49,000 based on his conversations with members of AGI.” He added, “Gunsmiths who own



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their own shops and keep them open for more than five years can make \$60,000 a year (Forbes article).

According to the Economic Research Institute, the average annual salary of a Gunsmith is \$45,239 and the hourly wage is \$22. They also project a 16% increase over the next five years, with an estimated salary of \$52,459 in 2026.

Because of the huge demand for firearms and low inventory on both guns and ammunition all over the country, “This unprecedented demand may leave some customers less selective about the type they ultimately purchase and more likely to consider a previously owned firearm. There’s also a segment of more budget-conscious customers who are happy to consider a well-maintained used firearm,” according to Southwick Associates, a respected market research firm. (August 2021, shootingindustry.com) A well-maintained, used firearm is a growing area of opportunity for Gunsmiths, especially if a novice firearm owner.

### Statistics on Gun Ownership and Possession

NICS or the (National Instant Criminal Background Check System) is the generally accepted measurement of new gun purchases and an overall accurate indicator of firearm interest. Statistics courtesy of the FBI.

In the last six years, the number of NICS have steadily increased, with 2020 experiencing an unusually large number of NICS:

- 2016: 27,538,673
- 2017: 25,235,215
- 2018: 26,181,936
- 2019: 28,369,750
- 2020: 39,695,315 (40.41% increase over 2019)
- 2021: 27,841,119 (through August 2021)

When the numbers are adjusted – removing data for gun permit checks and rechecks by states which use NICS for that purpose -- the latest adjusted total for 2020 is 21,083,643 – **a 59.7% increase** compared to the 2019 adjusted NICS of 13,199,172 for 2019, and **a 34% increase over 2016’s 15.7 million adjusted total, the previous all-time high.** (source: NSSF).

Looking just at the first six months of the year, 2021 looks to stay on pace; according to shootingindustry.com, NSSF adjusted NICS background checks show the second best start to a first half of a calendar year, with nearly 9.8 million (only 2020 was higher with nearly 10.3 NSSF adjusted NICS checks).

This indicates a continuing upward trend in gun ownership, good news for the Gunsmiths who repair, clean and customize firearms. A 2020 survey conducted by Statista/Gallup Poll



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conducted in October 2020 found that 42% of households in the U.S. report owning one or more firearms, with 32% saying they personally own a firearm.

The Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence estimates nearly 20.7 million guns were sold in 2020, the highest estimate ever made by the Brady Center for any year ([www.abc.com](http://www.abc.com)).

The record-setting gun sales in recent years show an increase in the diversity of gun owners in the United States, with women and minorities comprising large percentages of buyers. This mirrors those obtaining concealed carry permits (CCPs), with “permits for women and minorities continuing to increase at a much faster rate than for either men or whites,” according to John Lott of the Crime Prevention Research Center (CPRC), which tracks CCPs.

Another CPRC study shows 20 million Americans possessed a CCP (10/8/20 [gameandfishmag.com](http://gameandfishmag.com)), a seven fold increase since 1999 (2.7 million). The sharp increase could have been higher if not for the pandemic, as permit issuances slowed despite increased gun purchases ([foxnews.com](http://foxnews.com); 10/5/2020).

### **Overall Industry Statistics: Economic Impact and Employment**

One of the major industry associations, the NSSF recently released statistics in 2020 for the U.S. Firearms Industry. Some of the most relevant findings to PGS:

- Total economic impact increased 213% over eleven years: \$19.1 billion (2008) to \$60 billion (2019).
- The number of full-time equivalent jobs rose 100% over that same time period, from 166,000 to 332,000; 20,000 of those jobs were added in 2019 alone. (NSSF; [shootingindustry.com](http://shootingindustry.com))
- U.S. Firearm production recovered in 2020, with 9.3 million firearms – a significant recovery from 2019 (6.3 million), a 47% one-year jump. (ATF: 2020 Annual Firearms Manufacturing & Export Report)
- In addition to being extremely law abiding citizens, CCP holders support the economy. According to John Lott of the CPRC ([usconcealedcarry.com](http://usconcealedcarry.com)), with a sampling of states showing an average cost of \$257 per CCP in fees, training and processing costs – the 17.9 million CCP holders in 2019 provided an economic impact of \$4.6 million (NSSF).

### **Socio-Economic Trends**

Some of the recent, favorable trends for the firearm industry and related occupations such as Gunsmithing:



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- Overall increase in female target shooters of 11.7% from 2009 to 2018, the latest data available (NSSF).
- 2020 was a banner year for the firearm industry. First time gun owners were at an all-time high, with an estimated 8.4 million new gun owners in 2020, 40% were women and there was a 58% increase in sales to Black Americans.
- New gun owners totaled 3.2 million in the first six months of 2021, and over 22% returned to purchase another firearm in the first half of 2021. (NSSF)
- According to findings of a NSSF study conducted in mid 2020, new gun owners were 40% of customers, spending nearly \$600 per transaction and citing personal protection as the primary reason for their purchase.
- Correspondingly, firearm safety, said the dealers surveyed, was a priority – with 24.7% of first time buyers reporting they had previously taken some form of a firearm safety training course, and 62.9% asked about taking a firearms safety training course. (May 2020 NSSF survey cited on shootingindustry.com)
- Although negatively impacted by the pandemic due to social distancing guidelines, shooting ranges in the U.S. experienced growth, with an overall increase in participation from 2015 to 2020 of 28%. Many indoor ranges with on-site retail sales employ gunsmiths, and have been a source of employment for PGS graduates. The industry is projected to continue to grow at a healthy rate (ibisworld.com and NSSF). Graduates have been employed at ranges in Texas, Arizona and Georgia.

### **ATF Data on Federal Firearm Licenses/Licensing (FFLs)**

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the U.S. government began actively enforcing the regulations of the Gun Control Act of 1968. These actions reduced the number of Federal Firearm Licensee holders that were hobbyists, and buying and selling guns for their friends. As a result, people actively engaged in the business were able to capture a greater market share and as a result, an increased income.

A smaller number of FFLs are still being issued, but to more professional and committed entrepreneurs, including formally-trained Gunsmiths. PGS' Semester 4 Business Practice Course includes instruction on obtaining a FFL.

After dropping from a high of 284,117 FFLs in 1992 down to 102,913 in 2001, the number of FFLs increased gradually, holding at an average of about 140,000 over the years (2013-2015).



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However, the average number of FFLs for the past 5 years (2016-2020) has dropped to 133,761 from the 140,000 cited above. The number of Dealer 01 Licenses (the type most commonly held by Gunsmiths and related businesses including retail) has decreased every single year, from 56,754 in 2016 to 52,795 in 2020.

(Definition of Type 01 Dealer: in firearms other than destructive devices. Includes rifles, shotguns, pistols, revolvers, gunsmith activities and National Firearms Act {NFA} weapons. Some gunsmiths are a Type 07 Manufacturer, a smaller number compared to Type 01: 14,126 in 2020.)

What this means for the Gunsmithing industry is that there are fewer solo Gunsmiths and/or businesses that employ Gunsmiths to repair, service, modify, etc. the many firearms in the U.S., which experienced a tremendous increase in number in 2020 and 2021. We know of several PGS graduates with successful shops who had to close for weeks at a time to catch up in 2021.

### Summary

All of this research points to good news for the industry and specifically the Gunsmith profession. Southwick research, while recognizing the role of Covid-19 in the growth of the industry, forecasts continuing expansion of the firearm industry as a whole, at least until the next presidential election in 2024, and perhaps beyond.