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In Texas, Permitless Carry Means 'It Seems ... Everybody is Armed'

Tony Earls pulled out his handgun and opened fire, hoping to strike a man who had robbed him and his wife at an ATM in Houston. Instead, he struck Arlene Alvarez, a 9-year-old girl in a passing pickup, killing her.

Earls' lawyer said, "Everything about that situation ... was justified under Texas law." A grand jury declined to indict Earls.

The shooting was part of what sheriffs, police leaders and district attorneys in urban areas of Texas say has been an increase in people carrying weapons and in spur-of-the-moment gunfire in the year since the state began allowing most adults 21 or over to carry a handgun without a license, [the New York Times reports](#). Mainly in rural counties, sheriffs said they had seen little change. Gun-rights proponents said more people lawfully carrying guns could be part of why shootings have declined in some areas.

Texas joined an expanding effort to remove nearly all restrictions on carrying handguns. When Alabama's "permitless carry" law goes into effect in January, half of the states, [from Maine to Arizona](#), will not require a license to carry a handgun. The state-by-state legislative push has coincided with a federal judiciary that has ruled in favor of carrying guns and against state efforts to regulate them. Texas is the most populous state to eliminate handgun permit requirements. Five of the nation's 15 biggest cities are in Texas, making the permitless approach to handguns a fact of life in urban areas to an extent not seen in other states.

"It seems like now there's been a tipping point where just everybody is armed," said Sheriff Ed Gonzalez of Houston's Harris County. After a particularly violent 2021 in many parts of Texas, the crime picture has been mixed this year, with homicides and assaults up in some places and down in others. Far fewer people are getting new licenses for handguns even as many in law enforcement are seeing more guns on the street.

Recent studies have found a link between laws that make it easier to carry a handgun and increases in crime. It is possible that more guns in circulation [lead to more thefts of weapons](#) and [to more shootings by the police](#). "The weight of the evidence has shifted in the direction that more guns equals more crime," said Stanford law Prof. John Donohue. John Lott Jr., whose 1998 book, "More Guns, Less Crime," has been influential among proponents of gun rights, said the newer studies did not take into account differences between state handgun regulations that might account for increases in crime.