

More Kentuckians seek gun permits

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After Conn. school shooting rampage in December, more in Ky. start the process to obtain a concealed carry



Eve Sanders checks out her target after a qualification test at the Open Range gun range recently. In Kentucky, a concealed weapons permit is granted only after passing a background check, a written exam and a shooting qualification test. (By Matt Stone, The Courier-Journal) March 3, 2013

Purchase Image Zoom

Eve Sanders checks out her target after a qualification test at the Open Range gun range recently. In Kentucky, a concealed weapons permit is granted only after passing a background check, a written exam and a shooting qualification test. (By Matt Stone, The Courier-Journal) March 3, 2013 / By Matt Stone/The Courier-Journal

2.5 million

National FBI background checks run by Kentucky in 2012; the high number is mainly because of monthly checks on existing concealed carry license holders.

449,025

Carrying permits issued by the state of Indiana. Indiana does not require a training course to obtain a carrying permit under its concealed carry law, which dates to 1983.

243,924

Carrying permits issued by Kentucky since 1996, when the state's concealed carry license law took effect. Kentucky is among 39 "shall-issue" states that require permits to be issued so long as applicants meet state criteria such as background checks.

27,462

Concealed carry licenses issued by the Kentucky State Police last year, compared to 10,884 in 2004. The next-highest yearly total was 25,913 in 2009, the year after President Barack Obama was first elected and when fears of gun control were high.

12,685

The number of Kentucky firearm training certificates — which are required to get a license — issued in January, up from 4,355 in December. Officials said it was the highest monthly total in a decade.

To learn more

For more information about the concealed carry application process, visit the Kentucky State Police [website](http://www.kentuckystatepolice.org/conceal.htm), www.kentuckystatepolice.org/conceal.htm, which includes links to find certified instructors.

Claudie Rusk squinted as she pointed her black handgun toward the silhouette target, summoning the lessons she'd just learned on grip, safety and targeting.

The 64-year-old grandmother squeezed off 20 rounds that hit more than missed, good enough to pass her skills test during a daylong training class that Kentucky requires to obtain a concealed deadly weapon license.

“Good job, Mom,” said her 32-year-old son, Wesley Rusk, who also was seeking a license, in part because of fears that December’s Sandy Hook Elementary shooting massacre in Connecticut will lead to tougher gun laws.

He’s far from alone. Since the rampage, the number of Kentuckians seeking to qualify to carry a concealed gun has skyrocketed, state data show.

Kentucky State Police don’t release monthly figures on concealed carry licenses, but the number of firearm training certificates issued — which is one of the steps needed to get a license — leapt from 4,355 in December to 12,685 in January, the highest monthly number in a decade, officials said.

Although training certificates tapered to 8,677 in February, the number was still at least double that of any month last year aside from December, according to the state Department of Criminal Justice Training.

In fact, concealed gun licenses are on a record course in a state that has seen its license numbers grow rapidly since 1996, when the state’s concealed carry license law became effective.

The state reported that since 1996 it has issued 243,924 concealed carry licenses to Kentuckians. Those licenses are good for five years and can be renewed.

Although no permit is required to buy or own a gun, a concealed carry license allows Kentuckians to carry a weapon out of sight under their clothing in public. The permit doesn’t allow concealed weapons in places such as jails, courthouses and schools.

'Maxed-out' classes

Since December, local firearm-training instructors say their classes are packed as never before. Many are booked months in advance. Gun ranges are jammed, and even bullets are in short supply, said Kenneth Betts, a Louisville police officer who conducts courses.

“Normally, I have 20 people in a class, and now I’m maxed out at 40 and getting a ton of calls,” he said. “Everybody has started to say, ‘Hey, we need to be ready to protect ourselves and our family.’ And with all the talk of limiting firearms, people are buying up guns.”

Ken Pagano, training coordinator at Training Guns & Gear, said the state can barely print training booklets fast enough to meet a demand that has also pushed up the price of guns and ammunition.

But U.S. Rep. John Yarmuth, a Louisville Democrat who supports stricter gun laws, thinks Kentuckians’ underlying fears may be overblown. While proposals to require background checks at gun shows have at least a chance of passing, a ban on assault weapons or other more restrictive gun-control measures are unlikely, he said.

“This fear of dramatic changes in federal gun laws will subside, and people will calm down,” he predicted.

But there are no signs of that happening anytime soon.

Just last year, Kentucky State Police issued 27,462 concealed carry licenses, compared with 10,884 in 2004. And in 2009, the year after President Barack Obama was first elected and fears of gun control surged, 25,913 were granted.

Indiana has 449,025 carrying permits issued. Indiana State Police officials say they only recently began tracking annual and quarterly data but also expect a big jump when next month’s quarterly data are compiled.

Gun-control groups say the trend is worrying, contending that it raises the danger of misuse, tragic accident or the chance of an argument escalating into a homicide.

But Barry Laws, a firearms instructor who owns the Open Range gun shop in Crestwood, Ky., says those who take required courses learn safety and liability rules that make them safer gun owners, especially compared with those buying weapons without even background checks at gun shows.

The classes stress the seriousness of pulling a gun and the limited situations that deadly force can be used without being held criminally or legally liable.

“Some guys have a little bit of John Wayne in them. They think they’re going to be swooping in with their gun to save someone,” he said. “But after the class they turn into Pee-wee Herman. (They realize) that damsel may not be in distress and (you) might be going to jail.”

National studies show no definitive link between concealed carry laws and crime. And Kentucky’s attorney general, Justice Cabinet and state police said they didn’t have data showing how many license holders have been connected to shootings.

The Washington-based Violence Policy Center notes a number of shootings by people who have held concealed carry permits. Nidal Malik Hasan, accused in the 2009 Fort Hood, Texas, slayings, had a permit. But a recent state analysis in Texas found licensees are responsible for only 1 percent of a long list of crimes.

Limits and liability

More than half of all states, including Kentucky, require a training course to get a concealed carry permit. Indiana does not require it.

The eight-hour course, overseen by the Department of Criminal Justice Training, covers safe use, care and cleaning, marksmanship, possession laws and rules about the legal use of force and civil and criminal liability.

For example, though circumstances may vary, in general if you find a burglar stealing a diamond ring inside your home, the law says you can shoot, according the training guide. But a burglar who has made it to your porch or backyard on his way out? You don’t have a legal right to pull the trigger, according to the training information.

Students also learn they can’t take guns into court, prisons, schools and bars, unless those bars get 51 percent of their income from food. They learn which states recognize Kentucky’s permits, and that a license also qualifies them, if they’re over 21, to carry a nightstick or brass knuckles.

They must also hit a target from 7 feet away at least 11 of 20 times and take a written test.

Kevin Craft, 27, of Louisville, who recently took a training class with Betts, said he wants a license so he can protect his family “at a movie or a park.”

But he was surprised by the level of civil or criminal liability he could face — so much so, he doubts he’ll carry his gun as much as he envisioned.

Faith Yount, a 38-year-old Spencerian College instructor, also recently took a class. After inheriting guns when her father died, she decided to get a license to protect herself and because “you don’t know what will happen” with gun control.

She was startled by the cross-section of people taking the class at Open Range, she said.

“There was this little petite woman, an older woman, a lawyer’s wife, all kind of people,” she said. “You were like, ‘Why would they carry a gun?’ But I guess people could say the same thing about me.”

Getting a permit

Once they earn their training certificate and take it to the sheriff, Kentucky State Police run state and federal criminal background checks. Applicants are barred for reasons such as felony convictions, owing too much child support and having a history of drug abuse.

Kentucky conducts more national FBI background checks than any other state — 2.5 million in 2012. But that’s

mainly because in 2006 the state began running monthly background checks on concealed carry license holders, according to Sgt. Rick Saint-Blancard of the state police.

In 2012, the state denied about 2 percent of applications, roughly the same percentage as in recent years, according to Kentucky State Police data. Since 1996, it has revoked or suspended 7,893 licenses.

The pistol training itself is conducted by citizens who take an extra course to become instructors and use a state curriculum. There are more than 1,200 certified instructors statewide who by law can charge \$75 per student and who face a class D felony if they fail to fully instruct a student.

While some teach multiple classes at professional gun ranges, said Laws, who trains new instructors, others are “teaching a couple of friends in (their) living room and shooting in the backyard.”

A Dec. 15, 2012, Justice and Public Safety Cabinet report showed 50 investigations last year of instructors for possible violations such as short classes, excessive fees and late paperwork.

Six instructors subsequently resigned and three were convicted of felonies for improper training, the report said. In previous years, investigations were opened on allegations of allowing students to cheat on the written test or forcing students to rent weapons.

Other states in recent years have loosened training requirements. Virginia, for example, in 2009 began allowing applicants to meet training requirements with an online test.

Tim Grant, president of the Minnesota-based National Association of Certified Firearms Instructors, said Kentucky’s training program requires fewer course hours and a lower shooting pass rate than the most stringent programs, but he still considers the state’s program sufficient.

“Carrying a gun is a low-frequency, high-consequence activity,” he said. “If you do screw it up, the consequences are incredibly high. So training is very important.”

Kristen Rand, legislative director for the Violence Policy Center, said most states’ training classes won’t keep license holders from gun accidents, such as a Kansas man who recently shot his wife while adjusting his gun at a restaurant.

“I just don’t think some one-time training is really going to make much of a difference,” she said.

Prices higher

Firearms instructors and gun range owners in Louisville say there’s little doubt that 2013 will be a big year for new license holders and gun owners.

One sign: Ammunition has been in short supply since December. A handful of Louisville gun stores said bullets, especially for .22-caliber and 9 mm handguns, are difficult to purchase. Prices in some cases have doubled. Some gun ranges will only sell ammo to those who use their range.

Gun prices are up, too, and some gun store owners say the lack of ammo they can order to sell is hurting business.

“Think about it. You had the election in November, followed by record sales for Christmas,” said Gary Roman, owner of Louisville’s Firearms Service Center. “You come right behind that with the school shooting, which was a mushroom cloud. Everything on the market was absorbed in three days.”

Da-Wyone Haynes, 42, an instructor who helps Betts with his classes, said students often say they fear that Obama will “take our guns away” despite what he sees on balance as an expansion of gun-ownership rights across the country in recent years through relaxed state laws.

Nevertheless, Haynes said the recent shootings have galvanized interest in a new way.

“You have people who were on the fence, or saying ‘I’d never own a gun,’ now feeling like, ‘Hey, I’m responsible for protecting my family,’ ” he said. “There’s also this mentality of, ‘Oh my gosh, everybody out there is going have a gun; if I don’t have one I’ll be at a disadvantage.’ ”

While it’s a right he believes people should have, he said, he hopes that those qualifying for a license will ask, “Should I do it?”

“It’s a boon for folks in the gun industry. I just don’t know if it’s productive for us as a society,” he said. “I like Westerns as much as next person, but I don’t know if I want to see everyone walking down the street with a sidearm.”

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