OSP handled over 338,000 background checks last year

Total for 2021 fell below checks in 2020 but were higher than 2017-19

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The Oregonian

SALEM — Background checks for gun sales in Oregon remained high last year but did not the top the state's record year in 2020, according to a new state police report.

Oregon State Police last year conducted 338,330 background checks on prospective gun buyers, a drop from 2020, when the state recorded the most, 418,061.

Yet last year's number was still far greater than the background checks in each of the three previous years from 2017 through 2019, figures show.

For the past 25 years, less than 2% of people in Oregon seeking to buy a gun have been denied due to a failed background check, according to the state police's latest report obtained Tuesday.

Last year, 95%, or 320,735, of the purchases were approved after background checks were done.

The state police Firearms Instant Check System Unit has struggled to keep up with the increased volume of gun buyers and required background checks.

Under Oregon law, the police agency conducts state and national criminal background checks for federally licensed gun dealers and private people before a gun is sold or transferred. State law also requires a background check for all gun transfers, including those that take place at a gun show and between private parties.

The goal is to ensure the timely transfer of firearms to eligible buyers while also keeping guns out of the hands of those that are prohibited under state or federal law, according to state police.

Under federal law, however, a gun dealer may sell a firearm to someone if a background check is not completed within three business days.

Last year, state police approved 320,735 gun purchases and denied 1,129 purchases after conducting background checks. The total does not equal 338,330 because it does not include figures for two other categories contained in the report: canceled, those stopped by either the dealer or purchaser after the initial request for background checks, and pended, those requiring more investigation before final determination.

In 2020, 394,011 were approved and 2,119 denied, according to the latest report.

In 2021, most denials occurred because the person had been convicted of a felony, was on probation for a criminal conviction, or had been convicted of domestic abuse.

Last year, 1,101 people were denied guns due to background checks in Oregon. Of those denials, 58 were people who previously had been committed to a mental health institution, according to the data.

About 100 were denied because the guns sought for sale came back as having been reported stolen.

In 2021, the top three counties recording the most gun purchases were Washington County, 47,761; Clackamas County, 33,558; and Lane County with 32,090.

Deschutes County had the sixth highest transactions at 25,018, one notch above Multnomah County, with 23,789, according to the state police.

But when analyzed per 10,000 residents 18 or older, Harney County recorded the



Philip Kamrass/The Associated Press, File

Oregon State Police reported 338,330 background checks requested for gun purchases in 2021, according to a report. The total fell below the number requested in 2020 but was still higher than those for the years 2017-19.

most gun buys with 2,180 per 10,000 adult residents, followed by Union County with 1,851, and Crook County with 1,795.

Nearly 40% of the state police gun background checks were completed within three days.

Yet about 14% took six months or longer to complete, meaning the gun sales could proceed before a background check was done. State police said the

agency fielded more calls last

year from people challenging the denials of their background checks or calling with questions about the checks that were pending. As of April of this year, the unit would only receive people's challenges of denied sales due to failed background checks by email or U.S. mail.

The state police Firearms Instant Check System Unit operates seven days a week, 14 hours a day and is closed two days out of the year, on Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. The 30-member unit includes 26 background check staff and other support staff and a program manager.

More budgeted positions

After the unit was deluged in 2020 with an unprecedented increase in gun purchases and background check requests, state police asked lawmakers for more budgeted positions.

The Legislature during the regular session last year approved \$2.6 million in one-time general fund spending to support 17 additional positions, including 12 part-time staff, to help address a backlog of gun background checks. Recruitment began in November to try to fill those jobs, and the first new hires will start training in January, according to the state police report.

"It takes awhile to recruit and then train, and the people who are training are offline and their production is reduced," said Capt. Stephanie Bigman, a state police spokesperson. As a result, the unit logged 1,225 hours in overtime last year, a drop from the 1,354 overtime hours in 2020 but much higher than the overtime put in each year from 2017 through 2019.

"Events that occurred throughout 2020 severely impacted service levels within the (Firearms Instant Check System) program in nearly every way possible," the state police report said. "Background check volumes soared with the onset of COVID-19, followed by months of social unrest both locally and nationally, as well as stimulus money distribution and finally the presidential election.'

The higher demand for guns came at a time when the firearms unit suffered staff shortages due to absences resulting from COVID-19, coronavirusrelated safety directives that restricted staffing in the office and remote work that challenged the background check function, the report said.



Citizens for School Renovations



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THANK YOU BOND LEVY 31-105 VOTERS!

We, the Citizens for School Renovations Committee, would like to express our sincere gratitude to the La Grande community for its support of Bond Levy 31-105. Thank you for reinvesting in our community. This victory reaffirms the support and value you place in our children and their education. Time and time again our La Grande community has come together to support our children, which is a defining characteristic of our wonderful community.

Passage of this bond and the financial contribution to the community is a gift. Thank you for your generousity that helped bring this about and for caring so much about the economy of our community!

We want to thank LGSD School Board, Superintendent Mendoza, and all those community members who devoted their time and effort over the last two years to prepare the way for the bond. A sincere thank you to the community members who served on the Citizens for School Renovation Steering Committee, campaign volunteers, patrons who wrote letters to the editor in support of the bond, those who took the time to make endorsement videos, community members who donated funds to our committee, and local businesses who donated their services in support of the campaign. We appreciate the time and effort our community members put forth to support the Bond Levy campaign.

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