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## Gun Background Checks Work. Let's Fund Them.

By Frank A.S. Campbell - Feb 7, 2013

One of President Barack Obama's most popular proposals for regulating guns in the U.S. is a [plan](#) to expand firearm background checks to cover most private gun sales in addition to sales by licensed gun dealers. More than 80 percent of the public [supports](#) such universal background checks, including a [majority](#) of National Rifle Association members.

Yet even if the proposal survives a gantlet on Capitol Hill, its effectiveness will be compromised from day one: Too much of the information needed to make the system work is missing.

Gun checks by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Instant Criminal Background Check [System](#) can't keep firearms out of the wrong hands when information on a prohibited buyer is missing. This fact was underscored by the 2007 Virginia Tech tragedy. The NICS check didn't stop the sale of guns to Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter, because information about his mental-health history wasn't in the system.

Congress responded by passing the [NICS Improvement Act](#), authorizing \$1.3 billion in grants to fund state agencies and court systems to create the necessary information infrastructure. Yet even after additional mass shootings, the authorized sums were never requested by the president or appropriated by Congress; indeed, the plan has received only token funding -- \$50 million since 2009, or 4 percent of the authorized amount. As a result, information collection remains uneven, the databases full of gaps.

Obama supports increasing spending on the NICS Improvement Act from \$5 million in 2012 to \$20 million in 2013 and \$50 million in 2014. This is nowhere near enough.

### Investment Approach

Rather than let the system fail due to insufficient funds, we should emulate the investment approach taken by the government's [DNA Initiative](#), which for the past eight years has helped state and local governments outfit their DNA laboratories and dramatically decrease backlogs of unanalyzed DNA samples from convicted offenders, arrestees and crime scenes.

With total funding to states ranging from \$100 million to \$150 million annually, the DNA Initiative [transformed](#) the Combined DNA Index System, the [FBI system](#) that links all states' DNA databases, increasing total profiles in the system from 2 million in 2004 to more than 11.3 million today. The total number of CODIS program hits that have aided investigations has climbed from 19,000 in 2004 to more than 190,000 today.

Like DNA databases, NICS can only yield benefits if it contains relevant information. Acquiring that information requires significant investment in information technology at the state level. States only provide this information voluntarily, and their ability to do so hinges largely on resources being made available.

Data on people with dangerous mental-health histories is in especially short supply. According to a Government Accountability Office [study](#), in 2004 states had provided only 126,000 mental health records to NICS. By 2011 that number had increased to 1.2 million, and the additional records had a drastic effect: NICS mental-health denials increased from 365 in 2004 to 2,124 in 2011.

Despite such progress, a recent [analysis](#) by Mayors Against Illegal Guns, which was co-founded by Bloomberg LP's principal owner, Michael Bloomberg, reports that 23 states have submitted fewer than 100 mental health records to NICS; 17 states reported fewer than 10; four states reported none.

Even among states that have submitted thousands of records, reporting is still far from complete. Connecticut, for example, has made 14,000 NICS mental health submissions in recent years, but more than 16,000 such disqualifying records have never been input.

## **Inadequate Technology**

A GAO report identified inadequate technology as a major challenge to state reporting of mental-health information. Updating aging computer systems and integrating existing systems to accommodate information from numerous sources, such as courts, private hospitals, and state mental health offices, is cumbersome and expensive.

Mental-health information is generally not captured by a single state agency. Involuntary commitments, for example, typically generate manual records in non-law-enforcement agencies.

Privacy concerns also present a challenge. But states may never even grapple with such issues if a lack of resources prevents them from compiling the information in the first place.

The U.S. spent plenty of money on justice grants over the past five years -- more than \$14 billion. We just

chose not to spend much on NICS. Given the technology challenges faced by thousands of state courts and agencies, a few million dollars per state simply doesn't get the job done.

If the requisite funding for NICS improvement grants is not forthcoming, then Congress should consider other approaches to achieve the same end. One possibility is to mandate that a share of law-enforcement-assistance funds provided to states be set aside for information-system enhancements.

Unlike other proposals in the president's plan, fully funding NICS improvements requires no new laws. And if Congress and the president do eventually adopt universal background checks, but they don't also fully fund NICS, the new policy is bound to fail when information remains missing.

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