3D-Printed Firearms and Defense Distributed: A Guide to Understanding “Ghost Guns”

Disclaimer: This guide is intended to be informational only surrounding the topic of ghost guns and 3D-printed firearms. It is not legal advice.

Ever since the landmark ruling on 3D-printed firearms, outrage and moral panic have surrounded so-called “ghost guns.” Whether you’re a proponent of Second Amendment freedoms or just doing opponent research, it’s important to have the facts about what a ghost gun is and what it is not.

It’s also important to know other related terms in the world of firearms – like how is a ghost gun different from a 3D-printed gun? And what is an 80-percent lower? This guide will answer all of your ghost gun questions, and will separate fact from fiction surrounding this polarizing topic.

What Is a Ghost Gun?

Put simply, a “ghost gun” is a catchall term for any firearm without a serial number. There are a variety of ways a person can come to own a firearm without a serial number that do not involve breaking federal law, which generally prohibits the *removal* of serial numbers but not, however, the ownership of a firearm without a serial number.

It’s not a loophole in the law. The law is specifically written to exclude professional gunsmiths and hobbyists. Even if you own a ghost gun – that you must make yourself – you’re never allowed to sell or transfer it without getting a serial number. In fact, there are a number of procedures in place allowing for amateur gunsmiths to get a serial number for their homemade firearms for precisely this purpose.

What Is a Gun?

To understand the law behind so-called “ghost guns,” it’s important to understand what a gun is under the law. This relates back to the Ship of Theseus problem in philosophy: In this thought experiment, one considers a boat. What about a boat makes it a boat? How much of it may we replace and still be talking about the same object? Does a mast make the boat? The sails? The deck? The hull?

Now apply this to firearms. Is a barrel a weapon? What about a stock? What about the two of them together, but no trigger? Is the trigger alone a weapon? There are a number of combinations to this question: At what point does something stop being a hunk of metal and start being a firearm?

And the various combinations have one answer: A “gun” under the law is a part called the lower receiver. *This* ceases to be a hunk of metal when it is more than 80 percent finished. Up until that point, you just have a hunk of metal.

What Is an 80-Percent Lower?

Taking the above, we can extrapolate that it is perfectly legal to purchase a hunk of metal that also happens to be an 80-percent finished lower receiver. In fact, there is a small cottage industry dedicated to selling people this very object in an easy-to-process form. These are also known as “unfinished receivers” and “blanks.”

If you want to sell or otherwise transfer the receiver once it’s been finished, you’re going to need a license. However, if you just want to make yourself a weapon – either because it seems like a fun way to spend an afternoon or because you want to own an untraceable weapon – you don’t have to jump through any hoops other than purchasing the lower and finishing it. You don’t have to register it, you don’t have to get it a serial number. You don’t even need to pass the same background check you might otherwise have to.

Unsurprisingly, those selling 80-percent lowers tend to make them as easy as possible for the most amateur of amateur gunsmiths to complete. In fact, many of the same retailers selling 80-percent lowers likewise sell complete kits with everything you need to transform what is legally just a hunk of metal into a complete firearm by doing the remaining 20 percent of the work. You’ll still need to have some proficiency with machine tools to finish the weapon, but not nearly as much as what would be required to complete a lower from a raw piece of metal. A drill press or rotary tool are enough to finish most 80-percent lower receivers. The time required is between one and seven hours, depending on the skill level of the operator.

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