1. Introduction

‘Firearm and shotgun certificates in England and Wales’ contains a time series of Official Statistics on certificates issued by the police under the Firearms Act 1968 (as amended). The release presents information on the number of certificates granted and refused for new and renewal applications, certificates revoked, registered firearm dealers, visitors’ permits, European Firearm Passes (EFP) and Article 7 Authorities issued. The release also includes experimental statistics on the number of people who hold a firearm certificate and/or shotgun certificate, broken down by age and gender, and breakdowns of firearm and shotgun types.

Statistics in the release relate to the number of certificates and permits issued as at 31 March each year. However, the number of applications granted, refused and revoked relate to information in the year ending 31 March.

The release reports on licensed firearms only. No official estimate of illegally held firearms in England and Wales is available.

Uses of the statistics

Uses made of the statistics on firearm and shotgun certificates are listed below using the standard categorisation for Official Statistics (as shown in the United Kingdom Statistics Authority (UKSA) monitoring brief 6/2010, ‘The Use Made of Official Statistics’):

a) Informing the general public’s choices:
   - about the state of the economy, society and the environment; figures on legally-held firearms are used by the media in articles on law and order.
   - about the performance of government and public bodies; figures on levels and trends in firearm and shotgun certification are requested via parliamentary questions (PQs) and freedom of information (FOI) requests to gauge performance in general or specific areas.

b) Government policy making and monitoring:
Firearm and shotgun certificate statistics are used to monitor the performance and effectiveness of police forces, to monitor the performance and effectiveness of government policy and to inform policy and operational decisions by ministers.

c) Resource allocation – typically by central and local government:
Policing statistics, including statistics on firearm and shotgun certificates, demonstrate the range, extent and quality of police activities, and contribute to overall cases for police funding.

d) Supporting third sector activity – lobbying:
Firearm and shotgun certificate statistics are used by lobby groups to protect the rights and civil liberties of citizens and to support the value of legally held guns in the farming community. For example, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) use these statistics to monitor the legal possession of a weapon, and to promote and protect sporting shooting in the United Kingdom.
2.  Glossary

**Article 7 Authority** – Article 7 of the Weapons Directive requires any European Union (EU) resident wanting to purchase certain types of firearms, or ammunition for such firearms, outside their state of residence to have the prior authority of their own state.

**European Firearms Pass (EFP)** – The EFP is a passport for firearms for EU residents intending to take their firearm or shotgun to another EU state.

**Firearms Act 1968** - It is, with certain statutory exceptions, an offence to possess, purchase, or acquire any firearm, shotgun or ammunition to which section 1 or 2 of the Firearms Act 1968 (as amended) applies without holding a certificate. Section 1 of the 1968 Act applies to all firearms except a shotgun, an air gun, or a weapon prohibited under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968.

**Firearm** – According to the Firearms Act 1968, a firearm means a lethal barrelled weapon of any description from which any shot, bullet or other missile with a kinetic energy of more than one joule at the muzzle of the weapon can be discharged. It includes any prohibited weapon, any component part of such a weapon and any accessory to such a weapon designed or adapted to diminish the noise caused by the firing of the weapon.

**Handgun** – Handgun refers to the length of the firearm. Any firearm which either has a barrel less than 30cm in length or is less than 60cm in length overall is generally prohibited. The intention is to prohibit particularly dangerous firearms which are easy to conceal. However, the police may issue firearm certificates enabling the possession of certain handguns of historic interest, muzzle-loading pistols or handguns for the humane killing of animals.

**Muzzle-loading pistol** – The ammunition is loaded via the muzzle of the firearm, that is, from the open end of the gun’s barrel. They are not quick to load and therefore do not pose the same threat as some other types of guns.

**Registered Firearms Dealer (RFD)** – A dealer is defined in the Firearms Act 1968 as a person or a corporate body who, by way of trade or business: manufactures, sells, transfers, repairs, tests or proves firearms or ammunition to which section 1 of this Act applies, or shotguns; or sells or transfers air weapons. Firearms dealers are not authorised to trade in prohibited weapons without the Secretary of State’s authority.

**Rifle** – A rifle has spiral grooves in the barrel and bullets are used as ammunition.

**Shotgun** – A smooth-bore gun (not being an air gun) which: (i) has a barrel not less than 24 inches in length and does not have any barrel with a bore exceeding 2 inches in diameter; (ii) either has no magazine or has a non-detachable magazine incapable of holding more than two cartridges; and (iii) is not a revolver gun. Other smooth-bore guns may require a firearm certificate. It is, with certain statutory exceptions, an offence for a person to possess, purchase,
or acquire any shotgun without holding a shotgun certificate. Shotgun pellets are used as ammunition.

**Section 1 shotgun** – Contains a magazine holding more than two rounds.

**Section 2 shotgun** – May have a magazine restricted to no more than two rounds.

**Sound moderator** – An accessory to a lethal barrelled weapon or a prohibited weapon designed to diminish the noise or flash caused by firing the weapon.

**Visitors’ permit** – Visitors’ permits allow a visitor to Great Britain to possess a firearm, shotgun or ammunition without holding a firearm or shotgun certificate. Permits are in force for a period not exceeding 12 months. Scottish forces issue their own permits.
3. Legislation and regulations

The Home Office Guide on Firearms Licensing Law provides consolidated guidance on firearms licensing legislation. The guide is not intended to be a definitive statement of the law, but a cohesive explanation of the often complex area of firearms licensing.

Firearm and shotgun licensing

All persons acquiring or in possession of a firearm or shotgun must have a certificate issued by the chief officer of the police force area in which they reside unless they are otherwise exempt. Chapter 6 in the Home Office Guide on Firearms Licensing Law explains the exemptions in more detail.

Persons convicted of crime who are sentenced to a period of 3 years imprisonment or more are prohibited from possessing firearms for life. Those sentenced to 3 months or more but less than 3 years are subject to a 5-year prohibition which includes antique firearms. This applies to those with custodial or suspended sentences.

Certain types of weapons (e.g. machine guns) are prohibited under section 5 of the 1968 Act as amended by section 1 of the 1988 Act; their possession can only be authorised by the Secretary of State after enquiries by the police.

Firearm certificates

Firearm certificates are issued for weapons covered by section 1 of the 1968 Firearms Act (as amended), including rifles, muzzle-loading revolvers and shotguns with magazines that are capable of holding more than two cartridges. The chief police officer must be satisfied that an applicant has good reason for having a weapon, is fit to be entrusted with it, and that the public safety or peace will not be endangered. The certificate lists the number, type and serial number of each weapon held and any conditions attached (a standard condition is that weapons and ammunition are held in a secure place when not in use).

The Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 banned all firearms with a barrel less than 30cm in length or with an overall length of less than 60cm. Certain types of firearms are exempt, including muzzle-loading pistols, firearms used for the humane killing of animals, flare pistols and vintage pistols held as war trophies or collectors’ items.

Section 39 of the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 inserted provisions into the 1968b Act banning air weapons that use, or are designed or adapted for use with, a self-contained gas cartridge system. With effect from 20 January 2004, under section 5(1)(af) of the 1968 Act, such weapons could not be purchased, acquired, manufactured, sold or transferred without the Secretary of State’s authority.
Shaeehoom certificates

Shaeehoom certificates, covered by section 2 of the 1968 Act, permit the holder to possess any number of shotguns. These can include pump-action and self-loading weapons that have a magazine incapable of holding more than two cartridges, but excludes large magazine smooth-bore guns.

Apart from the general prohibitions applying to all types of firearm (see introduction above), applications may not be granted or renewed if a chief police officer has reason to believe that the applicant is prohibited by the Firearms Acts from possessing a shotgun or if they are satisfied that the applicant does not have a good reason for possessing, purchasing or acquiring one. Nor may applications be granted or renewed unless the chief police officer is satisfied that the applicant can be permitted to possess a shotgun without danger to the public safety or to the peace. The certificate specifies the description of the shotguns including, if known, the identification number of the guns.

Firearm and shotgun certificates – renewal cycle

Section 28A(1) of the 1968 Act allows for a certificate to continue in force, unless previously revoked or cancelled, for 5 years from the date when it was granted or last renewed. The certificate is renewable for a further period of 5 years by the chief officer of police for the area in which the holder resides. To alter the number and type of weapons held on a firearm certificate, an application for a variation must be made to the chief police officer. The expiry date of a shotgun certificate can be aligned with the holder's firearm certificate (section 11 of the 1988 Act). In 1989, forces began recording the number of weapons for both firearm and shotgun certificates on their computer systems.

Registered Firearms Dealers

Section 13(1) of the 1988 Act amended section 33(5) of the 1968 Act, increasing the registration period for dealers from 1 year to 3 years. The grounds for refusal of new applications for registration were extended and placed a requirement for registered firearms dealers to maintain a register of all transactions which must be kept and maintained for a minimum of 20 years.

Section 3(1)(c) of the 1988 Act requires businesses that sell air weapons to register with the police as firearms dealers. The section was brought into place in two stages: businesses were able to apply for registration from 6 April 2007 and the offence of not being registered came into effect on 1 October 2007.

Visitors’ permits

The 1968 Act (as amended) provides for visitors to Great Britain to have in their possession, or purchase or acquire a firearm or ammunition under certain conditions without a firearm or shotgun certificate. Visitors’ permits allow a visitor to have possession of a firearm or shotgun and to purchase or acquire ammunition and shotguns in Great Britain. Visitors’ permits are
usually granted enabling the holder to attend organised shoots such as deer stalking or competitive target shooting events.

EU residents visiting Great Britain must also be in possession of a valid EFP – see further information below.

The conditions for exemptions from holding a firearm certificate were revised in sections 15 to 19 of the 1988 Act. Visitors’ permits were introduced allowing the holder to possess a firearm or shotgun without holding a certificate. Visitors’ permits are in force for a period not exceeding 12 months. Group applications may be made for up to 20 people (section 17 of the 1988 Act).

**European Firearms Passes and Article 7 Authorities**

Each EU state was required to amend its firearms legislation to meet the requirements of the 1991 EC Weapons Directive. In the UK these changes were made by means of the Firearms Acts (Amendment) Regulations 1992, which made provision for the police to issue two documents to British residents - the EFP and an Article 7 Authority.

Broadly speaking, the EFP is a form of passport for firearms issued by EU member states to allow shooters to travel between member states with firearms without having to obtain separate authorisation from each member state visited. EU residents intending to take their firearm or shotgun to another EU state will need an EFP issued by their state of residence. EU residents intending to bring their firearm or shotgun to Great Britain must also be in possession of a valid EFP. Visitors must have a sponsor in Great Britain who applies on their behalf to the police for a visitors’ permit.

The only criterion for the issue of an EFP to a British resident is that the applicant must possess a valid firearm or shotgun certificate. The EFP does not replace the certificate.

Article 7 of the Weapons Directive requires any EU resident wanting to purchase certain types of firearms, or ammunition for such firearms, outside his or her state of residence to have the prior authority of their own state. In England, Wales and Scotland this agreement is at the discretion of the local chief police officer. Firearms cannot be brought into the UK if an individual does not hold an appropriate firearm certificate, even if Article 7 Authority has been granted.

**Age of a firearm and/or shotgun certificate holder**

The Firearms Act 1968 places restrictions on the purchase, acquisition, possession and use of firearms by, and the transfer thereof to, young people. The subject of minimum age to possess a firearm or shotgun is complicated; therefore for ease of reference, Appendix 4 in the Home Office Guide on Firearms Licensing Law provides a summary of the legislative requirements in this area. It should be noted that the table in Appendix 4 is a legal summary and does not take into account issues around issuing firearms or shotgun certificates to those aged under 18.
4. Quality and methodology

Data coverage
The main data measures for both firearm and shotgun certificates are:

- certificates on issue were collected in 1971; they were then recollected in 1983 and every year since
- new and renewal applications which have been collected every year since 1983
- the number of firearms and shotguns covered by certificates on issue which have been collected every year since 1995
- the number of people who hold a firearm and/or a shotgun was collected in 2015 and every year since
- a breakdown of firearm and shotgun types was collected in 2015 and every year since

During the data confirmation process in 2018, it was noted that shotgun certificates recorded as coterminous were not included in the figures extracted from the National Firearms Licensing Management System (NFLMS), in either the latest year or in previous years. A Cotermi nous certificate allows the holder of a firearms certificate, to have their shotgun certificate expire on the same day. Cotermi nous certificates are therefore excluded from the figures presented within tables 3, 4, 5, E1, E2 and E3. We are investigating this further and aim to publish statistics, over time, on coterminous certificates within next year’s release (financial year ending 31 March 2019).

Data collection and preparatory work
The statistics in the ‘Firearm and shotgun certificates in England and Wales’ release is a by-product of police administrative processes, and forms part of the statutory Annual Data Requirement (ADR) between the Home Office and police forces. The ADR is a list of all mandatory data requests made to police forces in England and Wales under the Home Secretary’s statutory powers. Key stages of the data collection process are listed in Appendix A.

The collection differs from other ADR collections, in that the data are collected by means of a single snapshot from a national database (the NFLMS). This has been the case since the financial year ending March 2008; before then data were collected by means of statistical returns from each force. The data on NFLMS is input by individual police forces. The figures are therefore subject to the inaccuracies inherent in using an administrative data source and are not necessarily accurate to the last digit.

Data quality and interpreting the figures
The statistics in the release for the years up to and year ending 31 March 2006 were compiled by each police force in England and Wales and submitted via an annual aggregate return to the
Home Office. As different systems were used to collect the data, prior to the advent of NFLMS some police forces were unable to prevent double counting of weapons that were shared between two certificate holders. Due to the transition from in-force data collection systems to NFLMS during 2006, robust data for all measures relating to the financial year ending 31 March 2007, and numbers of weapons and persons covered by certificates for the following year, are not available. Available figures for year ending 31 March 2008 onwards have been extracted from NFLMS by the Home Office and are subject to the inaccuracies inherent in any large-scale recording system.

As NFLMS is a live operational system, the number of firearm and shotgun certificates on issue can continually change and therefore there may be small differences when checking the data as at 31 March retrospectively. In addition, due to it being a live database, data might change during the day on which the information is being extracted.

To ensure valid data are entered, NFLMS uses some internal validation rules at the point of entry. For example, some fields will only accept a numerical value or a date format and will not allow any other format to be input. To help ensure that correct figures are published for each release, Home Office statisticians undertake a variance check exercise to identify figures that seem unusually large compared with figures for the previous year. In some instances, forces supply revised figures in light of this. Comparisons with national trends and with other police forces are also made as part of the quality assurance process.

In addition, for each release, Home Office statisticians ask forces to confirm headline figures. Forces can cross check the information on their local systems against what was extracted from the NFLMS. In some instances, forces supply revised figures.

On 1 January 1995, the renewal cycle for both firearm and shotgun certificates changed from 3 years to 5 years, which has significantly affected the trend resulting in year-on-year rises followed by year-on-year falls in the number of renewal applications. The high and low trend makes any meaningful time series analysis difficult to conduct.

As with the firearm and shotgun certificate renewals, moving from a 1-year to a 3-year registration period for firearms dealers has also affected the registration cycle trend resulting in year-on-year rises followed by year-on-year falls in the number of registration applications. Therefore, it is not appropriate to compare year-on-year changes for registration applications.

Expired firearm and shotgun certificates are listed as such on NFLMS. However, as detailed in Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary’s (HMIC)¹ report, ‘Targeting the risk’, there are some instances where forces have allowed licence holders to retain their weapons upon expiring. This has resulted in an under count in the number of firearms and shotgun certificates and the number of firearms and shotguns. In addition, the report also identified that some weapons

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¹ Name changed to Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) in summer 2017.
surrendered to the police in advance of their license expiring had not had their licences cancelled by forces. Therefore, this has resulted in an over count in the number of firearms and shotgun certificates and the number of firearms and shotguns. However, as detailed in the report, whilst this issue affected 7 out of 11 forces investigated, it only concerned 22 records across all forces.

The HMIC report identified that one force (out of the 11 investigated) issued temporary permits but did not enter details of the temporary permit onto the certificate holder’s record on the NFLMS. This means that there will be an undercount in the number of temporary permits.

**Revisions**

Data for the latest financial year (and previous years) may be revised in due course. However, revisions are less likely as it is extracted from a live database at a particular point in time (snapshot). It is standard practice across all Home Office statistical releases to incorporate revisions for previous years’ data in the latest release. Substantial revisions to figures presented in earlier editions of *Firearm and shotgun certificates in England and Wales* are described in the ‘revisions analysis’ section of the release.


The population estimates for the reporting year are [published by the Office for National Statistics](https://www.ons.gov.uk) within the same month as the publication release date, therefore the previous year’s estimated population figures are used to create the figures for ‘number of shotguns/firearms per 100,000 people as at 31 March’. These figures are then revised when the corresponding year population figures are available within the following year’s release.

**Rounding**

Data are mainly provided unrounded in the accompanying data tables of *Firearm and shotgun certificates in England and Wales*. This is to promote transparency and allow users to exploit the data further. However, caution should be exercised when comparing small differences between time periods as figures are not necessarily accurate to the last digit.

Percentages in the *Firearm and shotgun certificates in England and Wales, financial year ending 31 March 2018* release that are greater than 1% are presented to the nearest percent. All percentages less than 1% are rounded to the nearest significant figure, e.g. 0.43% would be presented as 0.4%.
5. Additional information

Where are the latest published figures?

Forthcoming publications are pre-announced on the ‘Statistics: release calendar’ on the GOV.UK website.

The firearm and shotgun certificate statistical releases can be found at:


Other sources of information

Scotland – Annual statistics on the number of firearm and shotgun certificates granted, renewed and revoked by police forces in Scotland are published by the Scottish Government. The figures are considered to be broadly comparable with those for England and Wales, due to the common legislation that governs the certification process.

Northern Ireland – The Police Service of Northern Ireland lists its statistical outputs on the Statistics page of its website, but there are no series that are directly comparable to those for England and Wales.

Other statistics relating to firearms published by the Home Office and the Office for National Statistics are:

Police use of firearms statistics

The Home Office publishes annual figures for each police force in England and Wales on: numbers of police firearms’ operations involving armed response vehicles; the numbers of authorised firearms officers; and the numbers of incidents in which police firearms were discharged. These statistics are Official Statistics and can be found on GOV.UK.

Focus on: violent crime and sexual offences

The Office for National Statistics publishes annual statistics on crimes involving the use of a firearm in England and Wales.

Feedback and enquiries

If you would like to make an enquiry or have any general feedback about the ‘Firearm and shotgun certificates in England and Wales’ statistical release, please email the Fire, Licensing and Public Order Analysis Unit at: FLPOAU@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk or write to: Fire, Licensing and Public Order Analysis Unit, 14th Floor, Lunar House, Croydon, CR9 2BY.
‘Firearm and Shotgun Certificates in England and Wales’ is designated as National Statistics, a subset of Official Statistics that has been granted accreditation by the UK Statistics Authority. National Statistics are produced to high professional standards set out in the Code of Practice and undergo regular quality assurance reviews to ensure that they meet customer needs. They are produced free from political interference.

The Chief Statistician, as Head of Profession, reports to the National Statistician with respect to all professional statistical matters and oversees all Home Office National Statistics products with respect to the Code, being responsible for their timing, content and methodology.