

At an old mill in Littleton, gun dealers openly defy Maura Healey's assault weapon decrees

Mill now hosts the most federally licensed gun manufacturers and dealers in the country

By Sarah L. Ryley and Andrew Brinker Globe Staff, Updated September 10, 2022, 2:19 p.m.



The Mill is home to the most federally licensed gun dealers in the country. ADOBE/JOHN HANCOCK/GLOBE STAFF

LITTLETON — The former elastic mill in this small town northwest of Boston looks like a relic, a labyrinth of creaking hallways, staircases, and dead-ends, badly in need of a paint job.

But to gun enthusiasts, “The Mill” is a Shangri-La; the place where you can find just about anything among the scores of gun vendors inside, from ordinary pistols to flamethrowers and World War I antiques — and, especially, all manner of ways around the state’s strict gun laws.



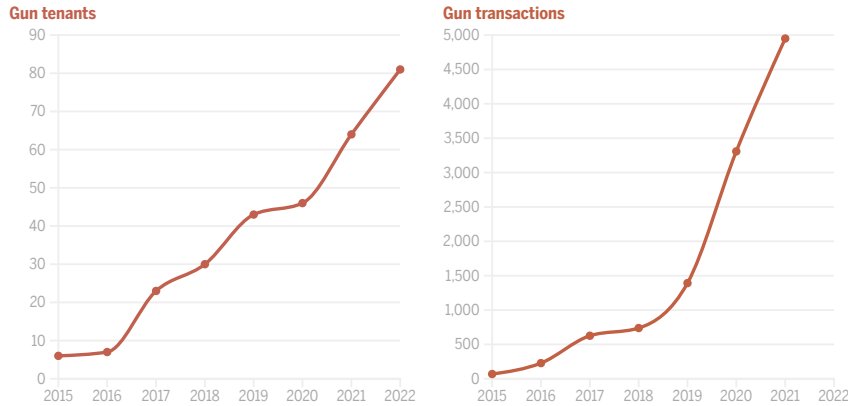
An old industrial mill on Great Road in Littleton is home to the largest cluster of federally licensed firearm dealers and manufacturers in the country. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Massachusetts banned assault weapons in 1998, but you'd never know it on a visit there. Some vendors sell decades-old military-style rifles and large-capacity magazines that were grandfathered in by the ban, while others offer newer assault weapons, which they say are modified to make them legal. It's also easy to buy all the parts to assemble an AR-15 at home.

And the place is growing like gangbusters. The number of gun vendors in the Mill has soared from three to at least 80 in just the last eight years, becoming the single largest collection of federally licensed gun manufacturers and dealers in the country.

Seemingly overnight, the Littleton Mill becomes a Second Amendment Shangri-La

In 2014, the Mill had only a handful of gun tenants. Then the building manager started actively recruiting fellow Second Amendment enthusiasts online. As word spread, more and more came to set up shop at the Mill. Only a handful reported significant in-person firearm sales last year, but combined, Littleton had the 5th-highest number of transactions in the state.

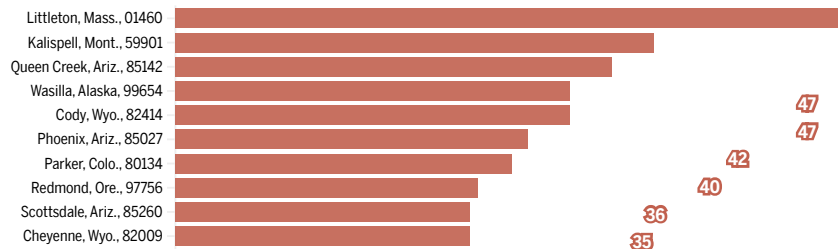


Source: Globe analysis of data from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and data from the Massachusetts Firearms Records Bureau. JOHN HANCOCK/GLOBE STAFF

A Flourish chart

A ramshackle old mill in a Boston suburb is the nation’s top gun hub

A former elastic mill at 410 Great Road in Littleton, Mass. houses the largest cluster of businesses and individuals licensed to manufacture and sell firearms in the nation. The zip codes with the next-highest number of licensees are in Montana and Arizona, but the licensees are spread out, not all in the same building like in Littleton.



Source: Globe analysis of August 2022 data on federally licensed manufacturers and dealers of firearms from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. JOHN HANCOCK/GLOBE STAFF

A Flourish chart

Gun industry experts point to the Mill as proof that despite the state’s gun laws, with so many loopholes and so little enforcement just about anyone can get their hands on an assault weapon.

“How easy is it to buy an assault weapon in Massachusetts? The answer is pretty easy. You can literally do it right now,” said Jason Guida, an attorney who specializes in firearms cases and previously served as director of the state Firearms Records Bureau.



Attorney General Maura Healey announced plans for stepped-up enforcement of the assault weapons ban in 2016, promising to target some of the very sales tactics the Mill's dealers are using now.

But so far, Healey has yet to charge a dealer anywhere in the state for violating the ban, a spokesperson confirmed. She is finishing her second term as attorney general and is [the Democratic nominee](#) in the race for governor.

Many of the dealers at the Mill are openly defiant of Healey. The longtime property manager, Jack Lorenz, even [has a saying](#): "Healey language is not spoken at the Mill."

The Globe found 25 dealers who had displayed or posted ads online for weapons and parts that seemed to go against Healey's directives on assault weapons, which [forbid the sale of their core parts](#) to the general public and hold that cosmetic modifications to the weapons don't put them in compliance with Massachusetts law.

"It is an open and brazen challenge to the attorney general," said Guida.

Healey declined to speak to the Globe for this story. Her spokesperson said her office is aware of the Mill, but would not comment on it further.

For their part, gun dealers there said they take great care to follow all laws, and insisted the attorney general's directives on assault weapons are merely her opinion and are unenforceable without a change in state law.



Army veteran Dan Landry opened Forgotten Bastard Guns at the Mill last year, at first, he says, to satiate his love of building AR-15s, but it has since grown into a full-fledged business. ANDREW BRINKER/GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Dan Landry, a 49-year-old Army vet and owner of Forgotten Bastard Guns at the Mill, said everything in his shop is above-board, despite the dozen partially assembled AR-15s displayed on the wall. Landry explained that he does not sell AR-15s to the public; he only sells customers the parts to assemble them.

“If what we were doing here wasn’t legal, the ATF [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives] would have shut us down years ago,” Landry said. “But they’re here every year, and the local police are here every year, and nothing has ever happened.”

The sprawling 19th-century industrial building is certainly an unexpected center of gun culture. Littleton is in one of the [deepest-blue parts of Massachusetts](#), and until recently, the Mill’s anchor tenant was a well-loved community theater.

But around 2014, Lorenz, 87, a cantankerous, liberal-hating machine gun dealer, started actively recruiting gun tenants on the forum [Northeastshooters.com](#), where he goes by “one-eyed Jack.”

Interest in the space ramped up in 2016, when Healey announced her crackdown on assault weapons.

That year, Jim Finnerty, a product manager at a manufacturing company, set up shop at the Mill, as he was organizing opposition to Healey on behalf of the Gun Owners Action League of Massachusetts. He was soon elected to serve a term as the group’s president, while at the Mill he helped recruit more tenants. Some say he is now master leaseholder to half the gun tenants there, a claim he did not dispute.

By August of this year, 80 tenants with licenses from ATF to manufacture and sell firearms were operating at the Mill. The ZIP codes with the next-highest number of such license-holders were in Kalispell, Mont., with 57, followed by Queen Creek, Ariz., with 52, but they are mostly spread out, not in a single building like in Littleton, according to the Globe’s analysis of ATF data.

Some Mill dealers are crammed a dozen to a room, with little more than a cubical-sized space as their state-mandated “place of business,” no website, and hours by appointment only. Others run full-fledged gun shops with lines out the door on Saturdays.

Combined, last year they reported to the state that they had made nearly 5,000 in-person gun sales. But that doesn't include what multiple Mill dealers explained is a common type of transaction there: the sale of parts that can be built into guns that would otherwise be banned by the state, either because they qualify as assault weapons, or because they are not on the list of [approved pistols](#).

The Globe identified 20 dealers at the Mill who displayed or advertised for sale core parts of assault weapons. Dealers also told the Globe that it's common for dealers to disassemble a banned gun for a customer, then sell the customer some of the parts and enlist a second dealer to sell the remaining parts.



1 of 5

What Makes an 'Assault Weapon?'

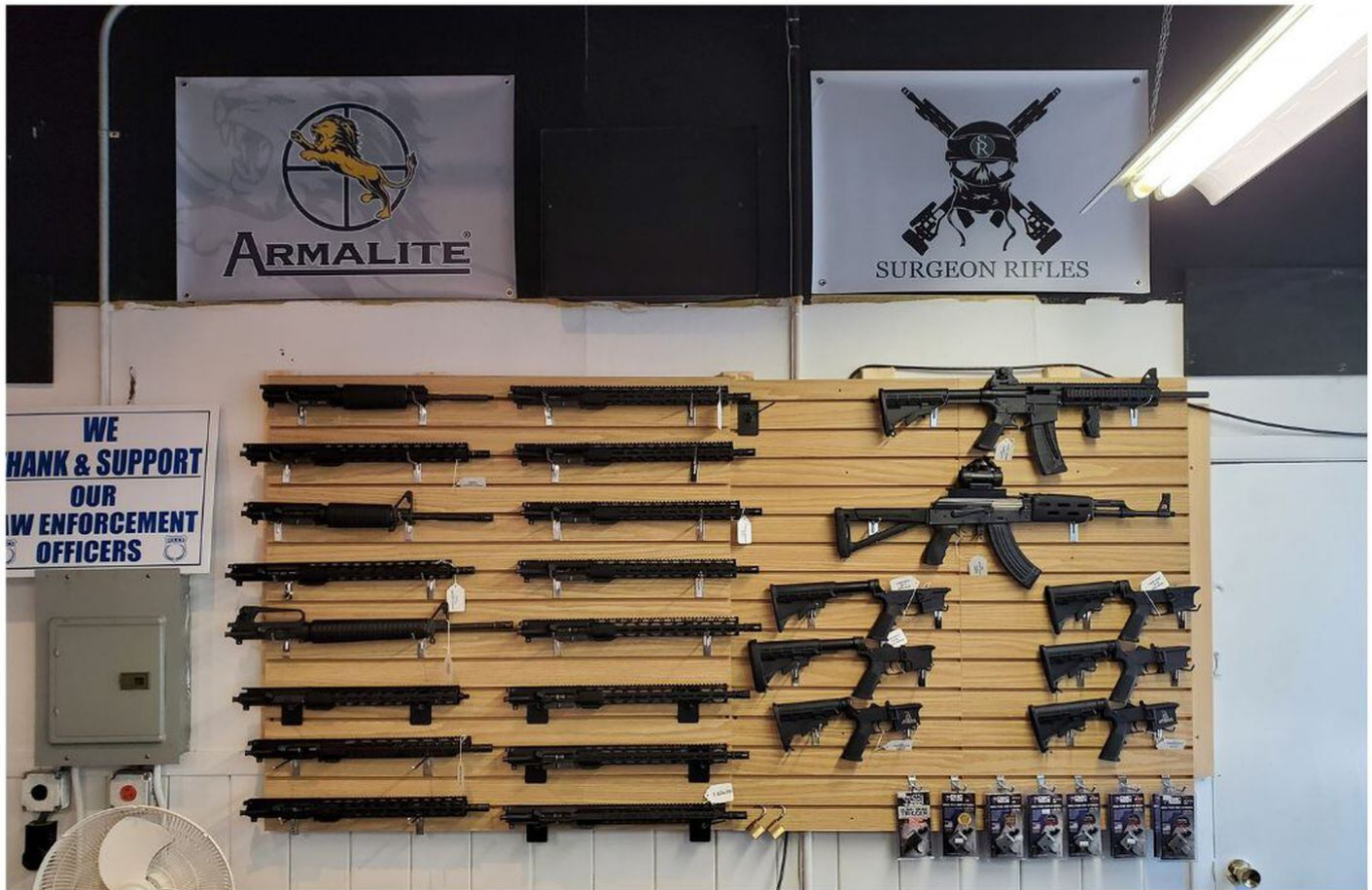
The federal Assault Weapons Ban was enacted in 1994 and expired in 2004. Massachusetts enacted the same ban, but with no expiration date, in 1998. The ban applies to semi-automatic weapons with specific features that mimic military weapons; a list of nine specific weapons and “copies or duplicates” of those weapons; and magazines with more than 10 rounds. Firearms and magazines manufactured before Sept. 13, 1994 are exempted. *(Image: Adobe Stock Images)*

 A Flourish data visualization

“They're all in the same room, and they're all working together, but they're technically different legal entities,” said Guida, who has represented Mill dealers and customers.

Some dealers insisted this practice is perfectly legal because the state's gun laws don't apply to gun parts; they only apply to weapons [that can fire a bullet](#). Nonetheless, Guida said, he advises against such sales because they could still be prosecuted under other legal doctrines.

Healey has thus far initiated no such prosecution. But a spokesperson for her office said the state assault weapons ban does apply to the core part of the firearm, just as the now-expired federal ban it was based on did.



Battle Road Firearms, a gun dealer at the Mill in Littleton, promoted a recurring "Build Your Own Rifle program" with "everything you need to build your own AR-15" for \$729. On Facebook, the dealer posts photos of walls filled with parts to build semiautomatic rifles (top), boxes of parts kits (lower right), and 30-round magazines for \$50 each (lower left) that are legal to sell because they were manufactured before the assault weapons ban was enacted, which limited magazines to 10 rounds. BATTLE ROAD FIREARMS LLC/FACEBOOK

Littleton Police Chief Matthew Pinard said just a handful of Mill dealers reported substantial sales. The rest, by his assessment, are only there "to skirt the law so that they can possess and shoot weapons that are on the weapons ban." Licensed manufacturers and dealers are afforded numerous exemptions to state gun laws.

"It's an expensive hobby, but they can afford the expensive hobby," he said.

Indeed, the Globe found many Mill dealers have high-paying day jobs: doctors, heads of IT, researchers, financiers, and lawyers at some of the area's most prestigious firms and institutions.

Clarence Edgar Floyd, a retired military signal intelligence analyst who runs a small shop at the Mill, suggested the place is as much a social club as a business.



At least 80 gun vendors were operating out of the Mill as of August 2020, according to data from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

“There is a sense of community at the Mill, because we’re all there for the same reason. We all love guns, and this place is our little haven,” he said.

Floyd specializes in machine guns, a niche business because they typically cost \$10,000 to \$20,000 and few people are licensed to sell and own them in Massachusetts.

Other vendors specialize in products and services in far wider demand, that earned the Mill the reputation as the place to go for the “[legal gray area](#)” stuff Healey was attempting to address when she issued her [enforcement notice](#) on the state’s assault weapons ban in the wake of the shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando that killed 49 people and wounded 53 more.

The Massachusetts ban, adopted in 1998, prohibits a list of specific weapons, like the Colt AR-15 and AK-47, and “copies or duplicates” of those weapons.

[Healey’s directive said](#) small tweaks to those weapons that had become common at Massachusetts gun shops, like removing the flash suppressor, “do nothing to limit the lethality of the weapon.”

Going forward, she said: “If a gun’s operating system is essentially the same as that of a banned weapon, or if the gun has components that are interchangeable with those of a banned weapon, it’s a ‘copy’ or ‘duplicate,’ and it is illegal. Assault weapons prohibited under our laws cannot be altered in any way to make their sale or possession legal in Massachusetts.”

Pro-gun activists [rallied at the state Capitol](#). Governor Charlie Baker and his administration sent letters to Healey complaining about what they viewed as the notice’s ambiguity, and a bipartisan group of 58 lawmakers signed a letter objecting to it “in the strongest possible terms.”



Gun rights activists rallied in front of the State House on July 23, 2016, to protest Attorney General Maura Healey's enforcement notice on the assault weapons ban. JOHN TLUMACKI

Healey successfully defended the enforcement notice against four legal challenges from gun stores and owners, which claimed that she unilaterally upended two decades of settled law and created widespread confusion.

But Healey's enforcement guidelines have never been fully tested. A spokesperson confirmed that her office still hasn't charged a single dealer with selling an assault weapon, though her staff has reached out to several dealers that had made "questionable sales." The review generally found the sales were compliant.

Jim Wallace, the executive director of GOAL, a plaintiff in one of the lawsuits, said he thinks Healey still hasn't acted upon her notice because she would get sued again and lose. "She'd rather just have people scared," he said.

Guida, the former Firearms Records Bureau director, said the lack of enforcement over time has sent a clear message to gun dealers.

"There's an idea that the attorney general's enforcement notice is a press release, that it hasn't been enforced in a court of law," he said.

Randall Dean, a vice president at a global technology company and a mentor to many Mill vendors as owner of the gun shop Dean Safety, has frequently advised people to disregard Healey's enforcement directives.

On Northeastshooters.com, under the moniker CrackPot, Dean writes: "Some dealers . . . are ignoring Healey and instead following the law as written."

On three recent visits to the Mill, Globe reporters found many shops openly hawking things that Healey would likely say violate the law.

The Globe scoured online forums, social media, and gun marketplaces for listings for 99 businesses and individuals who have held federal firearms licenses at the Mill since 2014.

The Globe found 25 dealers who clearly advertised or displayed guns and gun parts for sale to Massachusetts buyers that appear to be illegal under Healey’s interpretation of the ban — though her office declined to comment.

Sixteen dealers posted ads for assault weapons made “Massachusetts compliant” with the very modifications Healey explicitly said were not OK.

Twenty vendors advertised upper and lower receivers — parts of the weapon that contain the key operating mechanisms — which Healey said she’d treat the same as selling complete assault weapons. Two of those vendors even ran recurring “AR Builders’ Specials,” and four hawked “80% lower receivers” that are partially finished and don’t have serial numbers so they can be bought without a firearms license.

New [federal rules](#) that took effect on Aug. 24 made it illegal to sell these 80 percent receivers and assembly kits without a serial number. The rules are intended to make it harder for people to build undocumented “ghost guns” that are impossible to trace.

Finnerty, the former president of GOAL, posted an ad last year for 80 percent lower receivers and assembly kits that are “exactly what you need to [easily turn them into] fully functioning AR-15s.”

A few days after the federal rules were published in April, he reposted the ad a third time, writing: “I got a few more of these in. Get ‘em while you still can.”

When asked about the ad, Finnerty said he had stopped selling the unmarked lowers. “I forgot that ad was still active, and have since pulled it down,” he said.



Legal Arms Co is among 10 gun dealers at the Mill in Littleton, Mass., that the Globe found advertising custom builds of semi-automatic weapons. The company's Instagram page shows post after post of these weapons and the parts to make them, with captions like, "You pick the parts, we make it happen right there in front of you." The captions typically make no mention of the restrictions on those weapons for Massachusetts buyers. LEGAL ARMS CO/INSTAGRAM

The Globe also found 10 dealers who advertised custom builds of semiautomatic weapons. Jeffrey Steinbrecher, a lawyer who specializes in fighting traffic tickets and personal injury cases, opened Legal Arms Co. at the Mill last year, billing it as providing "Exotic and High Performance Firearms for discerning Massachusetts customers."

His company's Instagram page has raised eyebrows even among fellow Mill dealers, with post after post of semiautomatic pistols and rifles with banana-shaped magazines, captioned with slogans like, "You dream, we build." Most of the posts make no mention that there would be restrictions on owning the weapons in Massachusetts.

In an e-mail to the Globe, Steinbrecher said, "Since these photos are viewed mostly by people outside the state . . . putting any specific law on a picture is asinine."

Finnerty served Steinbrecher with an eviction notice after the Globe raised questions about the firearms he was selling, but Steinbrecher insisted that the notice was "improper" and had nothing to do with illegal activity. "To be clear we did not and do not violate any of the gun laws," Steinbrecher said.

Ron Glidden, chair of the state's Gun Control Advisory Board and a retired police chief, said some dealers try to escape legal responsibility by selling weapons parts rather than the whole weapon even though they know that the buyer is going to break the law by assembling a banned weapon.

"Shame on [the dealer] for selling something that they know the person's making into an illegal firearm," he said, adding, "the guy that puts it together, once it's all together, he's committed a felony."

Glidden, who has chaired the gun control board since its inception in 1999, couldn't recall an AG ever prosecuting a dealer for selling an assault weapon, even prior to Healey.

For now, the main enforcer of state laws at the Mill is Matthew Pinard, who became Littleton's police chief in 2018, just as the Mill was starting to fill with gun tenants. Prior to that, he said, the town of 10,000 had little experience with gun dealers.

In 2019, his officers and ATF inspectors did a sweep of the Mill and found no violations.

Since then, he said, his department has revoked one dealer's license for failing to record transactions, and two other dealers are under investigation by his department and ATF, but overall, they've had "zero problems."

Still, Pinard said he would welcome some assistance from the attorney general's office in enforcing the gun laws.

"It'd be nice for them to help us out," he said. "We're trying to do the best we can with the resources that we have."

Matt Stout of the Globe staff contributed to this story.

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