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Ghost gun: what is the weapon found with UnitedHealth CEO's murder suspect Luigi Mangione

Ghost guns bring into question the range of use cases for 3D printing, including for precision equipment such as firearms.

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Luigi Mangione, 26, a suspect in the New York City killing of UnitedHealth executive Brian Thompson, poses shortly after being discovered by police at a McDonald's restaurant in Altoona, Pennsylvania, U.S. December 9, 2024. Pennsylvania State Police/Handout via REUTERS

Luigi Mangione, the person suspected of the fatal shooting of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, was carrying a “ghost gun” when he was apprehended on Monday (December 9). What's a ghost gun?

The police suspect Mangione's gun may have been made using a 3D printer. These are homemade weapons that use a combination and assembly of various 3D printed parts — metals and plastic — to evade scrutiny. Kits for such guns, which include various parts to be assembled later, were once popular with hobbyists in the US, an icon of American libertarianism. That such a gun can fire a fatal shot shows just how far the technology has evolved.

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Ghost guns have become increasingly popular among criminals due to their virtually untraceable nature. These guns lack the serial numbers marked on other firearms, due to which law enforcement has an exceedingly difficult time tracing

them back to an individual purchaser. These guns also do not require the same level of background checks that may be needed for commercial firearm sales.

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This brings into question the range of use cases for 3D printing, including for precision equipment such as firearms.

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Are ghost guns a big problem in the US?

Ghost guns, which are formally known as privately made firearms (PMF), are a growing menace in the US, primarily due to their untraceable nature. In 2022, the US Department of Justice recovered 25,785 ghost guns in domestic seizures, marking a 1,300 per cent increase from 2016.

Law enforcement agencies in the US recovered and submitted nearly 38,000 suspected ghost guns between 2017 and 2021. As many as 19,273 suspected ghost guns were recovered and traced in 2021, up from 8,504 in 2020, as per a 2021 report by the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF).

Are ghost guns legal in the US?

While gun control remains a polarising issue in the United States, in 2022, President [Joe Biden](#) instituted a new rule that mandated ghost guns to have similar regulations as commercial firearms, including a serial number and background checks for buyers. However, the measure was challenged in the Supreme Court, and a final ruling has not been issued in the case.

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Supporters of ghost guns say they are meant for hobbyists. They also argue that people have the right to build such weapons under the Second Amendment, which allows US citizens the right to keep and bear firearms.

The other major firearms control law in the US, the Gun Control Act of 1968, allows private citizens to build guns for personal use. There are few regulations requiring them to be registered or traceable so long as they're not sold by the owner.