

Issue Overview: Guns in America

Every mass shooting in the United States starts a new debate over the right to own guns. Americans own more guns than anybody else on Earth. Firearms are involved in the deaths of more than 30,000 people in the U.S. each year. About two-thirds of these deaths are from suicide. Guns are also a big part of the story of the nation's founding. The National Rifle Association (NRA) is the main pro-gun group in the U.S. For decades, it has successfully convinced courts and lawmakers to weaken laws on owning and carrying guns and has prevented tougher laws from being passed.

The Situation

On June 12, 2016, a gunman killed 49 people in a bar in Orlando, Florida. The man pledged allegiance to the extremist group Islamic State. The group wants to start its own country under its version of Islamic law. Its fighters have taken over parts of Syria and Iraq. The week after the shooting, senators proposed half a dozen laws that would keep suspected terrorists from buying guns. They all failed to pass.

President Barack Obama has become frustrated by the lack of action in the Senate. In January 2016, he announced several orders aimed at reducing gun violence. They required that more gun sellers do background checks on people wanting to buy guns. Gun sellers have to make sure that the buyers aren't dangerous. Gun-rights supporters have challenged Obama's orders in court.

In 2013, there was a mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. After that, Congress tried to pass a law to make guns harder to buy, but it failed. Since then, states led by Democrats have increased bans on assault weapons. These are guns that can fire many bullets at the same time. California passed a new law meant to keep guns out of the hands of the mentally ill. But a majority of states weakened their gun laws. Many now allow guns in more places, including schools, restaurants, churches and public buildings. People can carry hidden guns in all 50

DEFINITIONS

mass shooting

A shooting where four or more people are killed randomly in a public place

Second Amendment

The amendment to the Constitution that allowed people to own guns to form militias

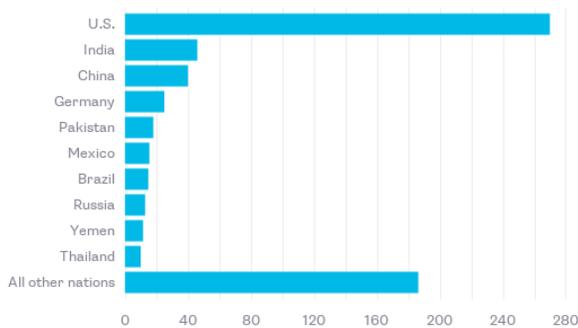
violent crime

Crimes that involve use of force, such as murder, assault, and robbery

states, and many states have increased the rights of people to use guns to defend themselves. The laws are very different by state, though. The U.S. has a higher per-person rate of murders committed with firearms than any other wealthy nation. Harvard and Northeastern University researchers say mass shootings have been increasing since 2011.

Civilian Firearms by Country

Estimated figures in millions in 2007, the most recent data available



The Background

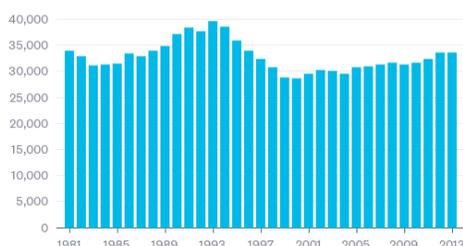
The U.S. is one of three countries whose constitutions let people own guns. Mexico and Guatemala are the two others. The right “of the people to keep and bear arms” is part of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The amendment, which was written more than 200 years ago, lets states form militias to protect themselves. A militia is a small army

made up of citizens, instead of full-time soldiers. In 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the amendment protected the gun rights of individuals, not just militias.

Beyond that, the gun is an important symbol in the U.S. It was carried by soldiers in the Revolutionary War and cowboys roaming the Wild West. As many as 310 million guns are owned by individuals in the U.S. Meanwhile, recent surveys show that just one-third of Americans own at least one gun or live with someone who does. In comparison, in the late 1970s to early 1980s, 50 percent owned a gun or lived with someone who did. Shootings in other countries also lead to debates over gun laws. In Switzerland, for instance, a large number of people own guns, but there is a very low murder rate. However, Switzerland began considering gun-control laws in 2013 after mass shootings.

The Gun Toll

Deaths from firearms in the U.S. each year



The Argument

The NRA and its allies argue that gun laws only hurt law-abiding gun owners. Criminals simply ignore them.

The NRA says that since Congress stopped banning assault rifles in 2004, violent crime in America has gone way down. Shootings, in general, are also down slightly.

Meanwhile, gun-control supporters say fewer weapons mean fewer crimes committed with guns. Australia passed strict gun ownership laws after a massacre that killed 35 people in 1996. Since then, there have been no mass shootings, and the firearms murder and suicide rates have dropped. The Annals of Internal Medicine said the level of gun violence in the U.S. is a national health crisis. Mother Jones is a liberal magazine that is against guns. It said that gun violence costs the U.S. \$229 billion a year.

Writing Task: You have just read an article about gun control. Write an essay arguing whether or not the United States should be more strict about controlling guns. Use evidence from the text to support your reasons and evidence.