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U.S. Gun Policy: Global Comparisons

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Updated: January 5, 2016

Introduction

The debate over gun control in the United States has waxed and waned over the years, stirred by a series of mass killings by gunmen in civilian settings. In particular, the killing of twenty schoolchildren in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012 fueled a national discussion over gun laws and calls by the Obama administration to limit the availability of military-style weapons. However, compromise legislation that would have banned [semiautomatic assault weapons](#) and expanded background checks was defeated in the Senate in 2013, despite extensive public support.

Gun control advocates sought to rekindle the debate following another string of deadly mass shootings in 2015, including the killing of nine people at a church in Charleston, South Carolina, and fourteen at a community center in San Bernardino, California. These advocates often highlight the stricter gun laws and lower incidents of gun violence in several other democracies, like Japan and Australia, but many others say this correlation proves little and note that rates of gun crime in the United States have plunged over the last two decades.

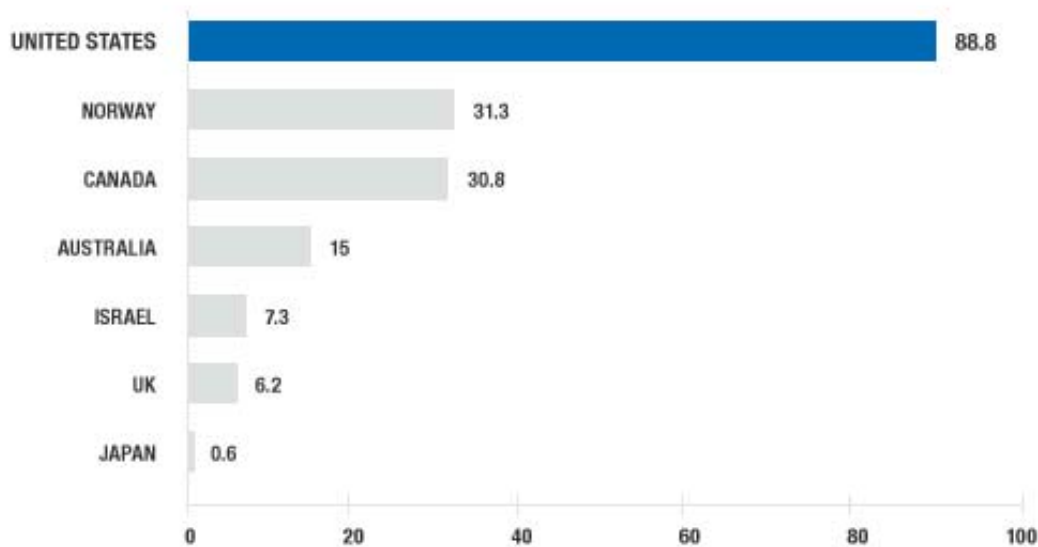
In January 2016, President Obama took a series of executive actions intended to curb gun violence, including measures to expand federal background checks to most gun buyers.

United States

The Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states: "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." Supreme Court rulings, citing this amendment, have upheld the right of states to regulate firearms. However, in a 2008 decision ([District of Columbia v. Heller \[PDF\]](#)) confirming an individual right to keep and bear arms, the court struck down Washington, DC, laws that banned handguns and required those in the home to be locked or disassembled.

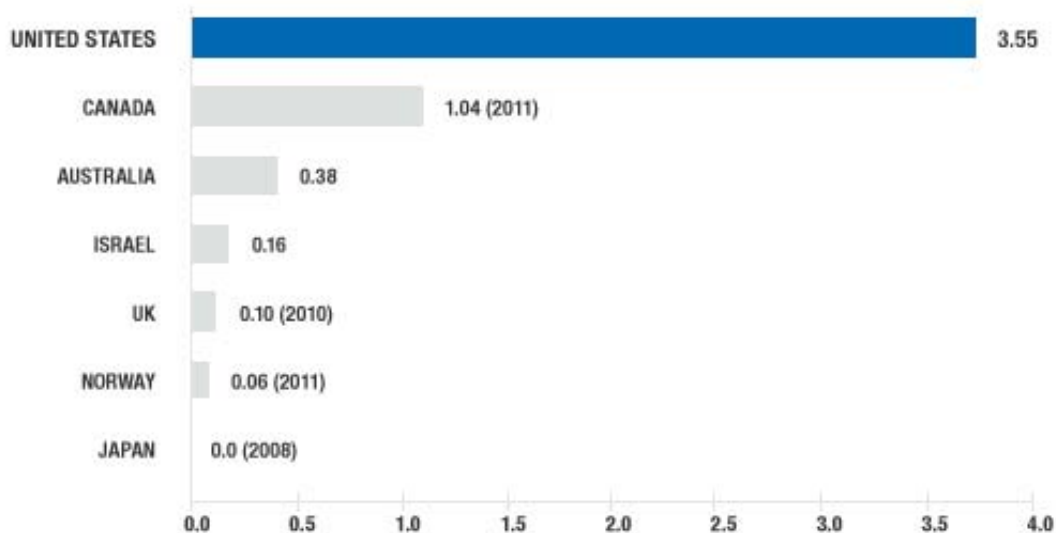
A number of gun advocates consider ownership a birthright and an essential part of the nation's heritage. The United States, with less than 5 percent of the world's population, has about 35–50 percent of the [world's civilian-owned guns](#), according to a 2007 report by the Switzerland-based Small Arms Survey. It ranks number one in firearms per capita. The United States also has the highest homicide-by-firearm rate among the world's most developed nations.

FIREARMS PER 100 PEOPLE (2007)



Source: Small Arms Survey

FIREARM HOMICIDES PER 100,000 PEOPLE (2013)



Sources: gunpolicy.org, University of Sydney

Credits: Jonathan Masters, Julia Ro

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But many gun rights proponents say these statistics do not indicate a cause-and-effect relationship and note that the [rates of gun homicide and other gun crimes](#) in the United States have dropped since highs in the early 1990s.

Federal law sets the minimum standards for firearm regulation in the United States, but individual states have their own laws, some of which provide further restrictions, others which are more lenient. Some states, including Idaho, Alaska, and Kansas, have passed laws designed to circumvent federal policies, but the [Constitution \(Article VI, Paragraph 2\)](#) establishes the supremacy of federal law.

The Gun Control Act of 1968 prohibited the sale of firearms to several categories of individuals,

including persons under eighteen years of age, those with criminal records, the mentally disabled, unlawful aliens, dishonorably discharged military personnel, and others. In 1993, the law was amended by the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, which mandated background checks for all unlicensed persons purchasing a firearm from a federally licensed dealer.

In January 2016, President Obama issued a [package of executive actions](#) designed to decrease gun violence, notably a measure to require dealers selling firearms at gun shows or online to obtain federal licenses and, in turn, conduct background checks of prospective buyers. Gun control advocates hope these steps will help close existing legal loopholes that have allowed violent criminals and others to purchase weapons without FBI screening.

Additionally, he proposed new funding to hire hundreds more federal law enforcement agents, and budgeting \$500 million to expand access to mental health care. (Suicides, many by individuals with undiagnosed mental illness, account for about [60 percent of gun deaths](#).) The president said he was compelled to move on this issue under his own authority because Congress had failed to pass “commonsense gun safety reforms.”

As of 2016, there were no federal laws banning semiautomatic assault weapons, military-style .50 caliber rifles, handguns, or large-capacity ammunition magazines, which can increase the potential lethality of a given firearm. There was a federal prohibition on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines between 1994 and 2004, but Congress allowed these restrictions to expire.

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Canada

Many analysts characterize Canada's gun laws as strict in comparison to the United States, while others say recent developments have eroded safeguards. Ottawa, like Washington, sets federal gun restrictions that the provinces, territories, and municipalities can supplement. Federal regulations require all gun owners, who must be at least eighteen years of age, to obtain a license that includes a background check and a public safety course.

There are three classes of weapons: nonrestricted (e.g., ordinary rifles and shotguns), restricted (e.g., handguns, semiautomatic rifles/shotguns, and sawed-offs), and prohibited (e.g., automatics). A person wishing to acquire a restricted firearm must obtain a federal registration certificate, according to the [Royal Canadian Mounted Police](#).

Modern Canadian gun laws have been driven by prior gun violence. In December 1989, a disgruntled student walked into a [Montreal engineering school](#) with a semiautomatic rifle and killed fourteen students and injured over a dozen others. The incident is widely credited with driving subsequent gun legislation, including the 1995 Firearms Act, which required owner licensing and the registration of all long guns (i.e., rifles and shotguns) while banning more than half of all registered guns. However, in 2012, the government abandoned the long-gun registry, citing cost concerns.

Australia

The inflection point for modern gun control in Australia was the Port Arthur massacre of April

1996, when a young man killed thirty-five people and wounded twenty-three others. The rampage, perpetrated with a semiautomatic rifle, was the worst mass shooting in the nation's history. Less than two weeks later, the conservative-led national government pushed through fundamental changes to the country's gun laws in cooperation with the various states, which regulate firearms.

The [National Agreement on Firearms](#) all but prohibited automatic and semiautomatic assault rifles, stiffened licensing and ownership rules, and instituted a temporary gun buyback program that took some 650,000 assault weapons (about one-sixth of the national stock) out of public circulation. Among other things, the law also required licensees to demonstrate a "genuine need" for a particular type of gun and take a firearm safety course. After another high-profile shooting in Melbourne in 2002, Australia's handgun laws were tightened as well.

Many analysts say these measures have been highly effective, citing declining gun-death rates, and the fact that there have been no gun-related mass killings in Australia since 1996. Many also suggest the policy response in the wake of Port Arthur could serve as a model for the United States.

Israel

Military service is compulsory in Israel and guns are very much a part of everyday life. By law, most eighteen-year-olds are drafted, psychologically screened, and receive at least some weapons training after high school. After serving typically two or three years in the armed forces, however, most Israelis are discharged and must abide by civilian gun laws.

The country has relatively strict gun regulations, including an assault-weapons ban and a requirement to register ownership with the government. To become licensed, an applicant must be an Israeli citizen or a permanent resident, be at least twenty-one-years-old, and speak at least some Hebrew, among other qualifications. Notably, a person must also show genuine cause to carry a firearm, such as self-defense or hunting.

However, some critics question the efficacy of these measures. "It doesn't take much of an expert to realize that these restrictions, in and of themselves, do not constitute much by the way of [gun control](#)," writes Liel Leibovitz for the Jewish magazine *Tablet*. He notes the relative ease with which someone can justify owning a gun, including residing in an Israeli settlement, employment as a security guard, or working with valuables or large sums of money. Furthermore, he explains that almost the entire population has indirect access to an assault weapon by either being a soldier or a reservist or a relative of one. Israel's relatively low gun-related homicide rate is a product of the country's unique "gun culture," he says.

United Kingdom

Modern gun control efforts in the United Kingdom have been precipitated by extraordinary acts of violence that sparked public outrage and, eventually, political action. In August 1987, a lone gunman armed with two legally owned semiautomatic rifles and a handgun went on a six-hour shooting spree roughly seventy miles west of London, killing sixteen people and then himself. In the wake of the incident, known as the [Hungerford massacre](#), Britain introduced the Firearms (Amendment) Act, which expanded the list of banned weapons, including certain semiautomatic rifles, and increased registration requirements for other weapons.

A gun-related tragedy in the Scottish town of Dunblane, in 1996, prompted Britain's strictest gun

laws yet. In March of that year, a middle-aged man armed with four legally purchased handguns shot and killed sixteen young schoolchildren and one adult before committing suicide in the country's worst mass shooting to date. The incident sparked a public campaign known as the Snowdrop Petition, which helped drive legislation banning handguns, with few exceptions. The government also instituted a [temporary gun buyback](#) program, which many credit with taking tens of thousands of illegal or unwanted guns out of supply.

However, the effectiveness of Britain's gun laws in [gun-crime reduction](#) over the last twenty-five years has stirred ongoing debate. Analysts note that the number of such crimes grew heavily in the late 1990s and peaked in 2004 before falling with each subsequent year. "While tighter gun control removes risk on an incremental basis," said Peter Squires, a Brighton University criminologist, in an interview with CNN, "significant numbers of weapons remain in Britain."

Norway

Gun control had rarely been much of a political issue in Norway—where gun laws are viewed as tough, but ownership rates are high—until right-wing extremist [Anders Behring Breivik](#) killed seventy-seven people in an attack on an island summer camp in July 2011. Though Norway ranked tenth worldwide in gun ownership, according to the Small Arms Survey, it placed near the bottom in gun-homicide rates. (The U.S. rate is roughly sixty-four times higher.) Most Norwegian police, much like the British, do not carry firearms.

In the wake of the tragedy, some analysts in the United States cited Breivik's rampage as proof that strict gun laws—which in Norway include requiring applicants to be at least eighteen years of age, specify a "valid reason" for gun ownership, and obtain a government license—are ineffective. "Those who are willing to break the laws against murder do not care about the [regulation of firearms](#), and will get a hold of weapons whether doing so is legal or not," wrote Charles C. W. Cooke in *National Review*. Other gun-control critics have argued that had other Norwegians, including the police, been armed, Breivik might have been stopped earlier and killed fewer victims. An [independent commission](#) after the massacre recommended tightening Norway's gun restrictions in a number of ways, including prohibiting pistols and semiautomatic weapons.

Japan

Gun-control advocates regularly cite Japan's highly restrictive firearm regulations in tandem with its extraordinarily low [gun-homicide rate](#), which is the lowest in the world at one in ten million, according to the latest data available. Most guns are illegal in the country and ownership rates, which are quite small, reflect this.

Under Japan's [firearm and sword law](#) [PDF], the only guns permitted are shotguns, air guns, guns that have research or industrial purposes, or those used for competitions. However, before access to these specialty weapons is granted, one must obtain formal instruction and pass a battery of written, mental, and drug tests and a rigorous background check. Furthermore, owners must inform the authorities of how the weapon and ammunition is stored and provide the firearm for annual inspection.

Some analysts link Japan's aversion to firearms with its demilitarization in the aftermath of World War II. Others say that because the overall crime rate in the country is so low, most Japanese see no need for firearms.

Additional Resources

The [New York Times Magazine](#) profiles the National Rifle Association, perhaps the most powerful lobby in the United States.

[GQ](#) investigates how Americans buy, sell, justify, and "even come to love the deadliest things among us."

The [Christian Science Monitor](#) highlights the life-and-death stakes of living in a more heavily armed America.

This [CFR Backgrounder](#) explores militant extremism in the United States.

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