

UNDERSTAND GUN VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

Following multiple mass shooting tragedies in recent years, Democrats have called for federal policies which largely target gun ownership and, specifically, so-called “assault rifles.” Rather than stoking a partisan political narrative, Congress must respond to these tragedies by analyzing the facts about gun violence.

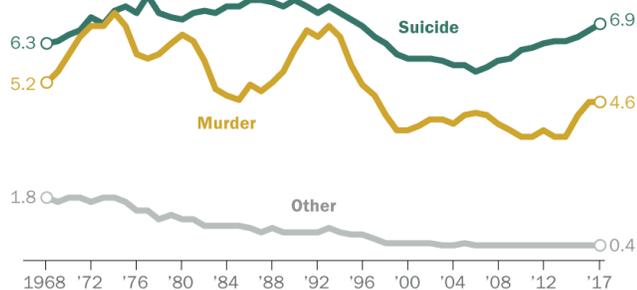
BACKGROUND

Democrats have long advocated for gun control policies ranging from expanded background checks¹ to buyback programs² and confiscation of certain firearms³ in response to mass shooting fatalities. Many talking points and headlines supporting such policies offer an inaccurate portrayal of gun violence in America. The facts about gun violence tell a different story: the vast majority of gun homicides are neither perpetrated with so-called “assault rifles,”⁴ nor do they occur as part of mass shootings.⁵ From 2000 to 2014, mass shootings accounted for only 0.1 percent of total firearm-related deaths.⁶

According to 2017 data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “39,773 persons died from firearm-related injuries in the United States.”⁷ Of that number, suicides took 23,854 lives while homicide accounted for 14,542 deaths.⁸ In contrast, mass shootings, where three or more victims were killed, resulted in 117 deaths in 2017.⁹ While gun suicide and homicide rates have edged up in recent years, they “are both lower today than in the mid-1970s,” as demonstrated by the chart below.¹⁰

After declining in late 1990s, U.S. gun suicide and gun murder rates have edged higher in recent years

Gun death rate per 100,000 U.S. residents, by type



Note: “Other” includes gun deaths that were unintentional, involved law enforcement or had undetermined circumstances.
Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Quick Take

Despite Democrats’ political narratives, the overwhelming number of gun homicides does not involve “assault rifles” or mass shootings.

Congress should analyze other factors that lead to mass shootings, such as observable indicators that may lead individuals to become active shooters. States should serve as the laboratories of democracy when addressing firearm policies.

Handguns were the most common weapon used in homicides during 2017, resulting in 7,032 deaths.¹¹ By contrast, rifles (403 deaths), shotguns (264 deaths), and other guns (187 deaths) accounted for a relatively small percentage of firearm-related homicides.¹² By comparison, knives claimed almost four times as many victims (1,591 deaths) as rifles. Personal weapons such as hands and feet resulted in 696 victims — almost twice the number killed with rifles.¹³

Members of Congress should also consider the motives and behaviors of shooters when analyzing factors contributing to gun violence. The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) studied 63 active shooters from 2000 to 2013. The study’s main conclusion provides insight on disrupting future attacks:

What emerges is a complex and troubling picture of individuals who fail to successfully navigate multiple stressors in their lives while concurrently displaying four to five observable, concerning behaviors, engaging in planning and preparation, and frequently communicating threats or leaking indications of an intent to attack. As an active shooter progresses on a trajectory towards violence, these observable behaviors may represent critical opportunities for detection and disruption.¹⁴

The study also found that only two percent of assailants used illegally purchased firearms; only a quarter of the surveyed individuals had any history of mental illness; and very few had prior criminal convictions.¹⁵

“Assault weapons” defined as weapons capable of fully-automatic fire have been strictly regulated since the passage of the National Firearms Act of 1934.¹⁶ Efforts to additionally control certain semi-automatic rifles such as the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act¹⁷ place a disproportionate emphasis on curtailing gun ownership of firearms infrequently used to commit homicides. Such efforts ignore the facts and circumstances of gun violence. Nevertheless, congressional Democrats continue to prioritize similar policies in the 116th Congress.¹⁸

The Second Amendment protects both individual and collective rights to bear arms, but the Supreme Court has recognized certain firearm restrictions as presumptively lawful. These include, but are not limited to:¹⁹

- Prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill;
- Laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive public areas, such as schools and government buildings; and
- Laws imposing condition and qualification on the commercial sale of firearms.

CONSTITUTIONAL AUTHORITY AND REPUBLICAN PRINCIPLES

The Constitution’s Second Amendment places clear limitations on government power to restrict lawful gun ownership.²⁰ Congress should recognize these limits and focus on other factors that may deter further acts of gun violence.

POLICY SOLUTIONS

Federalism and civil liberties, including the right to keep and bear arms, are founding principles of the United States. As such, individual states are often best suited to address gun policy in their respective jurisdictions. Congress should not draft reactive, one-size-fits-all legislation that willfully ignores the facts about gun violence.

Please contact Cameron Smith or Kelsey Wall with the Republican Policy Committee at (202) 225-4921 with any questions.

¹ H.R. 8, the Bipartisan Background Checks Act of 2019, passed the House of Representatives in February 2019.

² Every Democratic presidential candidate has expressed support for a voluntary or mandatory buyback program. See Maggie Astor, *We Surveyed the 2020 Democrats on Gun Control. Here Are the New Dividing Lines*. New York Times (Oct. 13, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/us/politics/democrats-gun-control.html>.

³ Former Democratic presidential candidate Beto O’Rourke has expressed support for a federal gun confiscation program. Virginia Governor Ralph Northam (D-VA) also stated he was “working on” a gun confiscation policy with the state secretary of public safety. See Zachary Steiber, *Virginia Governor Pushes Gun Control After Democrats Take State Houses, ‘Working’ on*

Confiscation Plan. The Epoch Times (November 8, 2019), https://www.theepochtimes.com/virginia-governor-pushes-gun-control-after-democrats-take-state-houses-working-on-confiscation-plan_3141010.html.

⁴ “Assault weapons” are defined as weapons capable of fully-automatic fire, which have been strictly regulated since the passage of the National Firearms Act of 1934.

⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *2017 Crime in the United States*, Expanded Homicide Data Table 8, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2017/crime-in-the-u.s.-2017/topic-pages/tables/expanded-homicide-data-table-8.xls>.

⁶ Michael Siegel and Clair Boine, What are the Most Effective Policies in Reducing Gun Homicides? Rockefeller Institute of Government (March 29, 2019), <https://rockinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/3-28-19-Firearm-Laws-Homicide-Deaths-Brief.pdf>.

⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Deaths: Final Data for 2017*, National Vital Statistics Reports, Volume 68, Number 9, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr68/nvsr68_09-508.pdf.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Mark Follman, Gavin Aronsen, and Deanna Pan, *US Mass Shootings, 1982-2019: Data from Mother Jones’ Investigation*, Mother Jones (Updated Aug. 31, 2019), <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/12/mass-shootings-mother-jones-full-data/>.

¹⁰ John Gramlich, *What the data says about gun deaths in the U.S.*, Pew Research Center (August 16, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/16/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/>.

¹¹ FBI, *supra*, note 5.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ James Silver, Andre Simons, and Sarah Craun, *A Study of the Pre-Attack Behaviors of Active Shooters in the United States Between 2000 and 2013*, Federal Bureau of Investigation (June 2018), <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/pre-attack-behaviors-of-active-shooters-in-us-2000-2013.pdf>

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Pub.L. 73–474 (1934).

¹⁷ Pub. L. 103-322 (1994) at Title XI.

¹⁸ Most notably, the House passed H.R. 8, the Bipartisan Background Checks Act of 2019. House Democrats also introduced H.R. 1296, the Assault Weapons Ban of 2019, which has received 215 cosponsors.

¹⁹ *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 U.S. 570 (2008).

²⁰ U.S. Const. amdt. II.