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Preventing America's Gun Violence Crisis

Jenna Stinson

Summary

In 2024, the United States Surgeon General declared gun violence a public health crisis. America ranks among the highest countries in the world for gun violence, and the highest compared to other high-income countries. Many states across the world have experience mass shooting events but often take steps to restrict gun ownership in the aftermath. However, mass shootings and gun violence continue to grow in the United States as more permissive policies are passed every day. Common sense gun laws must be enacted by the United States to stop the growing crisis.

Key Takeaways

- The United States has a highly unique relationship with guns; it is the only country in the world where civilian-owned guns outnumber the total population.
- A strong link can be found between states with permissive gun policies and high rates of gun violence.
- The epidemic of gun violence can be remedied through specific, foundational policies.

In the United States, there are more privately owned guns than there are people. The expansive gun culture of Americans has resulted in a sharp increase of gun violence and mass shootings. The frequency of mass shootings—commonly referred to as the death of four or more people, excluding the shooter, in one incident—has rapidly increased to the point where it has become a near-daily occurrence in the United States. Although mass shootings have been rising in the U.S., meaningful gun control laws have not been passed at the federal level to resolve what the United States Surgeon General in 2024 declared as a public health crisis. In contrast, many countries around the world have passed stricter gun laws to reduce gun violence, such as Australia and Germany. This paper seeks to address two key, and often debated questions: can the link between gun control policies and mass shootings be scientifically established, and what actionable policies can be realistically established in the United States to reduce the rate of gun violence?

Gun Ownership and the Epidemic of Mass Shootings in America

The rate of gun ownership in the United States as of 2022 is 120 guns for every 100 citizens, a number that is incomparable with any other nation (CNN). This means that in America, there are more civilian-owned firearms than people. High rates of gun ownership are attributed to a legal framework that prioritizes individual possession over public safety, leading to exceptionally high rates of gun violence and mass shootings.

Firearm violence is a significant cause for concern in the United States. In fact, a study conducted by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School for Public Health (2024) found that firearms have been the leading cause of death among children and teens since 2020, surpassing car crashes and cancer. Every day, 125 people in the United States are killed by gun violence, and twice as many are shot and wounded (Everytown, 2024). Compared to other high-income countries, Americans are 26 times more likely to be shot and killed (Everytown, 2024).

Mass shootings tend to be the primary cause of concern amongst Americans. These are commonly defined as incidents where at least four people are killed, excluding the shooter, and they can happen anywhere. Some of the worst mass shootings in recent history have been in bars such as Orlando Nightclub in 2016 (49 killed, 53 injured) or schools such as Virginia Tech in 2007 (32 killed, 23 wounded) and Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 (27 killed, 2 wounded) or even churches such as Texas First Baptist in 2017 (26 killed, 20 wounded) (Statista, 2025). For the past five years, there have been more mass shootings than days in the year, with 2021 being recorded as the worst year for mass shootings, averaging one incident every 12 hours (Everytown, 2024).

School shootings in America are all too common, and unfortunately, sending your kids to school has become a point of anxiety for many parents. Since Columbine in 1999, which is regarded as the largest and most impactful shooting of its time, an estimated 398,000 children have experienced some form of gun violence in schools (Cox et al, 2025). In fact, for the past four years, there have been, on average, 80 school shootings per year, or two shootings every week of the school year (Matthews et al, 2025).

A study conducted by the U.S. The Department of Education in 2018 reported that 95% of schools now conduct active shooter drills (Musu-Gillette et al., 2025). These drills have become more common than tornado drills and sometimes are practiced more frequently than fire drills. School boards have been doing what they can to protect students, including installing bulletproof glass, metal detectors, and window blockers. Private companies have also begun developing bulletproof backpacks for students and bulletproof classroom doors.

Gun Policy and Legislation in the United States

Gun laws in the United States are divided into two major groups: federal and state. On the federal level, the right to possess a firearm is enshrined in the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which famously states: “the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed” (U.S. Const., amend. II). This amendment also helps to explain why the rate of civilian-owned firearms in the United States is so high compared to other countries around the world. The creation of the Second Amendment was based on an established norm of state militias, which were most prominently used to fight the British in the American Revolution before the establishment of a national military. After the ratification of the Constitution, the states were allowed to keep their militias, which the federal government could mobilize in the event of attacks. The Second Amendment was adopted to ensure that these militias were well-trained and equipped. Over time, as the need for its original intent declined, the Second Amendment became a symbol of freedom and individual liberties for many Americans.

There is some general federal legislation regulating gun ownership; however, the primary restrictions exist at the state level. The number and severity of laws restricting gun ownership vary by state and are often based on political affiliation. One of the most controversial policies, the assault-weapon ban, broadly prohibits the purchase and possession of high-powered semi-automatic firearms. A similar law briefly existed at the federal level in 1994 and expired in 2004, which banned the manufacture of such weapons (Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act, 1994). Since 1994, the assault weapons ban has become highly politicized. Only 10 states have implemented laws against assault weapons, even though these types of guns have caused 85% of the fatalities in all mass shootings (DiMaggio et al, 2019; Everytown, 2025).

Around half of the states in America (22) have enacted what the gun law database, Everytown calls “foundational laws.” These laws include the requirement of a background check or a permit to purchase, Extreme Risk laws (enable law enforcement to seek a court order for the temporary confiscation of a person’s guns, if they are at risk of hurting themselves or others) (Everytown, 2025). These states have explicitly rejected Stand Your Ground laws, which allow people to shoot and kill in public if they are acting in self-defense (Everytown, 2025). 26 states have also passed child-safety and/or secure-access laws (Everytown, 2025).

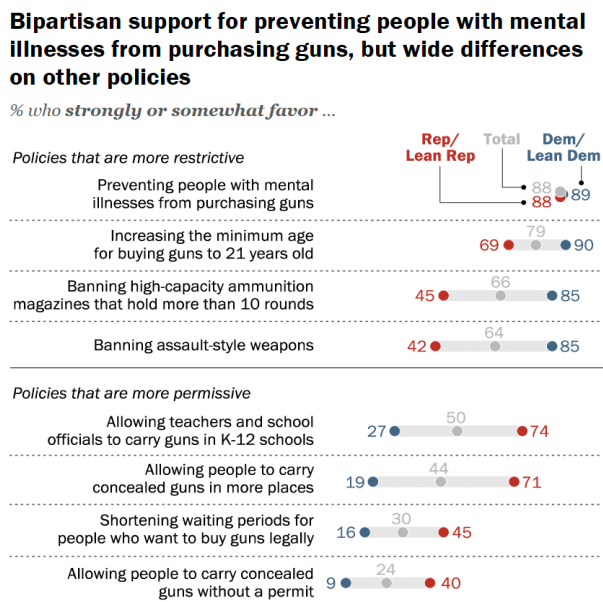
The 10 states, California, Maryland, Illinois, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Washington, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Connecticut, which all have these “foundational laws” and assault weapon bans, have reduced the rate of gun violence significantly and remain under the national average for incidents of gun violence (Everytown, 2025). Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi are rated among the highest for gun violence and are ranked 33rd, 34th, and 49th, respectively, for gun law strength (Everytown, 2025). This shows unequivocally that states that implement more restrictions on gun ownership will see a decrease in gun violence and mass shootings.

Public Opinion and the Gun Debate

Why then, if there is a proven correlation between public safety and restriction of gun ownership, have broader policy steps not been implemented across the U.S.? The lack of expansion of these “foundational laws” can be attributed to American public opinion on guns. Polling conducted by Pew in 2024 found that 4 in 10 adults live in a house with a gun, and the top reason that Americans cite for owning a firearm is “personal protection” (Shaffer, 2024). A majority of Americans, or 61%, from both political parties agree that it is “too easy to legally obtain a gun.” However, fewer than that, or 58% support stricter gun laws (Shaffer, 2024). Support for the actual gun laws themselves is highly

split along political lines, which shows that Democrats are more likely to favor stricter gun laws, while Republicans favor more permissive laws.

Graph 1:



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 5-11, 2023; Pew Research Center.

Another poll asks Americans their opinion on public safety compared to personal liberties. A survey conducted in 2024 found that overall (51%), Americans believe it is more important to “protect the right of Americans to own guns” over controlling gun ownership (Shaffer, 2024). The most revealing poll suggests why Americans are not prioritizing the implementation of gun safety laws amidst the growing crisis of gun violence. This last poll asked Americans whether gun ownership “does more to increase safety than decrease it,” to which a majority agreed (Shaffer, 2024). This means that most Americans believe the solution to decreasing gun violence is through more guns and more permissive gun laws. This has become a trend in Republican controlled states, where a study conducted by Luca et al (2020) found that “the annual number of laws that loosen gun restrictions doubles in the year following a mass shooting in states with Republican-controlled legislatures.”

Global Perspectives on Firearm Regulation

The United States is the only nation in the world where civilian guns outnumber the total population, and the amount of gun violence that occurs in the U.S. is incomparable to any other country. However, many other countries have experienced large-scale mass shooting events and have chosen significantly different policy paths than the United States.

Australia is one of these countries that struggled with gun violence for around a decade before it had the worst mass shooting in its country's history, the Port Aurther massacre on April 28th, 1996, which resulted in the death of 35 people (Fox et al, 2025). Public opinion sharply turned against guns, and 12 days later, Parliament established the National Firearms Agreement (Fox et al., 2025). After the agreement was passed on May 10th, 650,000 civilian firearms were voluntarily surrendered in exchange for government compensation (Parliamentary Education Office). Semi-automatic rifles were banned, and gun licensing was heavily reformed under the agreement (Parliamentary Education Office). Since 1996, there has only been one mass shooting in Australia, recorded in 2019 (Fox et al,

2025). The Australian model is primarily regarded as the world's most effective case study for controlling and decreasing gun violence.

Generally, European countries benefit from low rates of gun violence due to their extensive licensing and training processes for gun owners. Germany has one of the lengthier processes to obtaining a firearm which includes, joining a shooting club or obtaining a license, a written exam and practical, a note of mental fitness from a doctor (if you are under 25), proof of proper storage for a firearm, passing an extensive background check, and then applying for a permit (Carlsen and Chinoy, 2019). This can be compared to the process of obtaining a gun in the United States, which only requires a basic background check that considers criminal history, immigration status, and records of domestic violence (Carlsen and Chinoy, 2019).

One of the more permissive countries in the European Union is the Czech Republic. In Czechia, prospective owners must overcome multiple barriers, including a written and practical test, a mental health check, and a clean criminal history (Johnston, 2021). Because of these basic safety measures, the difference between gun violence in Czechia and the United States is still very large. In the U.S., there is an average of 4.1 gun-related deaths per 100,000 people compared to the 0.1 average per 100,000 enjoyed by Czechia and Germany (Johnston, 2021).

What all of these global models have in common is a shift of the burden of proof onto the applicant, who must prove their suitability and need to the state, rather than the state having to prove the applicant's unsuitability.

Policy Pathways to Curtail Gun Violence

Decreasing the rate of mass shootings and gun violence in the United States requires policy reform that prioritizes public safety while also respecting the reality of constitutional law. Five basic policies can be implemented that would strengthen public safety and dramatically reduce the rates of mass shootings and gun violence in the United States.

1. Universal background checks.

Implementing universal background checks would nationalize standards for gun ownership. These checks ensure that every individual purchasing a firearm, regardless of where the transaction occurs, is screened for disqualifying factors, such as a felony conviction or a restraining order.

2. Mandatory Extreme Risk Protection Orders.

The federal government can fund states to empower law enforcement and family members to petition courts to temporarily remove firearms from individuals who clearly pose a threat to themselves or others.

3. Secure Storage and Child Access Prevention Laws.

These laws would require any firearms to be stored securely (locked, unloaded, or separate from ammunition) when not in use. This would prevent children and adolescents who are at the highest risk for self-inflicted and accidental firearm injuries from accessing any weapons (Johns Hopkins, 2024).

4. National licensing and waiting periods.

The most significant failing of the United States' system of obtaining firearms is the time and ease of access. The U.S. is unique because of how fast someone can buy a gun; in over half of the states,

it takes less than a day. Background checks take less than a few minutes, and anyone who passes a basic background check can buy a gun at their local superstore. The national licensing requirement would lengthen the process of obtaining a firearm by requiring training and a license application. The mandatory waiting period of 7-14 days should accompany all firearms sales to provide a necessary deterrence to those who may be acting on impulse to make irrational decisions.

5. Restrictions on high-capacity magazines and semi-automatic rifles.

Following the model set by Australia and many other European states, the United States must restrict the sale and manufacture of high-capacity magazines, thus reinstating the Federal Assault Weapons Ban passed in 1994. Further, this ban should specifically target those assault weapons that are designed primarily for mass casualty applications.

Addressing the mass shooting epidemic in the United States requires an understanding that it cannot be remedied through one single policy. It demands a concentrated political effort to mitigate gun violence through legislation that has been proven effective in many other countries across the world. Public opinion, too, must change. It must become widely recognized that an increase in guns and permissive laws has a clear effect on the rate of mass shootings and gun violence in the United States. Only by adopting a coordinated science-based public education campaign and a legislative-focused policy plan can the United States begin to solve its substantial gun violence crisis.

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Author



Jenna Stinson

Jenna is a Junior at St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY double majoring in History and Political Science and minoring in Peace Studies on the Pre-Law track. She is currently studying in Prague through CIEE. In the United States she has worked on election research projects and the Virginia Governor's campaign. She is President and Founder of the St. Lawrence University One Love Chapter, working to bring awareness to domestic abuse in her community. She has been rowing for 7 years and is currently a varsity rower in college. In her free time, she enjoys baking with her friends.

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Martinská 2, 110 00 Prague 1



+420 602 502 674



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