

Issue Overview: Guns in America

By Bloomberg, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.03.16

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Toy guns in Massachusetts. Photo: Photo by Svadilfari, Flickr

Each new mass shooting in the United States fires up debate over the country's gun laws. Many feel that the right to carry a gun is almost sacred. Americans own more guns than anybody else on Earth, even when you take population into account. Firearms are involved in the deaths of more than 30,000 people in the U.S. annually, about two-thirds of which are suicides. Guns are also central to the story of the nation's founding. The National Rifle Association (NRA), the main pro-gun group, has been on a decadeslong winning streak convincing courts and lawmakers to loosen gun restrictions and to prevent the passage of tougher laws.

The Situation

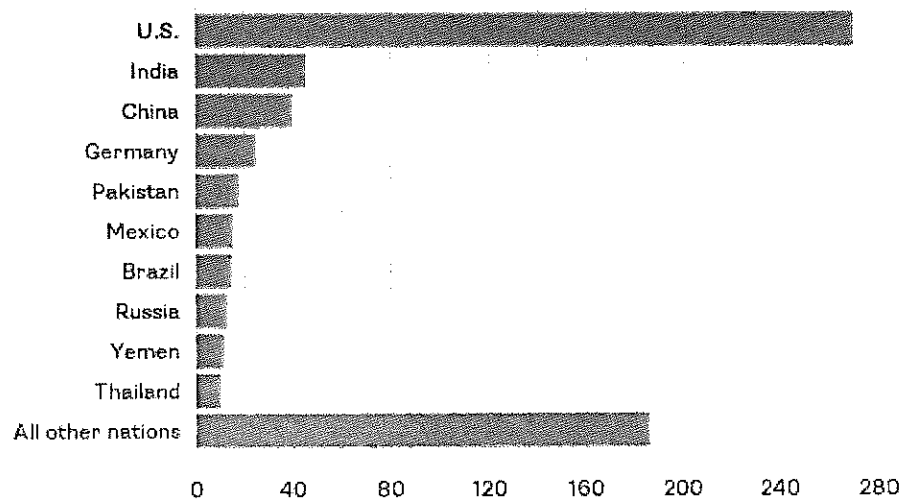
On June 12, 2016, a shooter pledging allegiance to the extremist group Islamic State killed 49 people in a gay bar in Orlando, Florida. The week after that, half a dozen proposals intended to keep suspected terrorists from buying guns failed in the Senate. Islamic State is attempting to set up its own country governed by its version of Islamic law. The group's fighters have captured parts of Syria and Iraq.

President Barack Obama became frustrated by the lack of action in the Senate. In January 2016, he issued a series of executive orders aimed at reducing gun violence. Most importantly, they required that more gun sellers do background checks on people wanting to buy guns. Gun-rights advocates have challenged Obama's orders in court.

A congressional bill to expand background checks was defeated in 2013, after a massacre the year before at a school in Newtown, Connecticut. States led by Democrats increased bans on assault weapons. These are guns that can fire many bullets at the same time. California created a new type of order 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. Hidden guns are now allowed in all 50 states, and many states have expanded the rights of people to use guns in self-defense. 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 industrialized 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

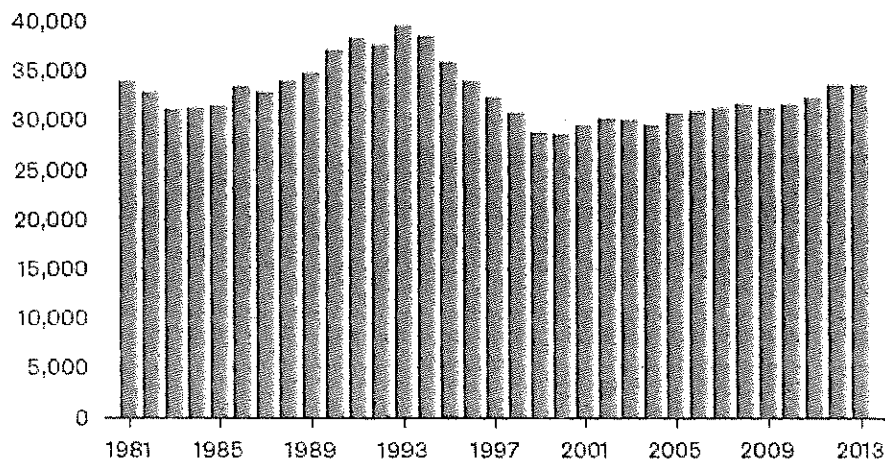
The U.S. is one of three countries whose constitutions let people own guns. Mexico and Guatemala are the two others. The right "of the people to keep and bear arms" is part of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It was created more than 200 years ago

to allow states to form militias to protect themselves. The interpretation of the Second Amendment has evolved over time, and in 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it protected the gun rights of individuals, not just militias.

Beyond that, the gun is a cultural icon in the U.S. — carried by soldiers in the Revolutionary War, frontiersmen conquering the Great Plains and cowboys roaming the Wild West. The number of guns in private hands has grown to as high as 310 million in the U.S. Meanwhile, recent surveys show that just 32 percent of Americans own at least one gun or live with someone who does, compared to 50 percent in the late 1970s to early 1980s. Shootings in other countries also led to debates over gun laws. Switzerland, for instance, combines a high gun ownership rate with a low murder rate. But the European country began considering weapons-control measures in 2013 after mass shootings.

The Gun Toll

Deaths from firearms in the U.S. each year



The Argument

The well-funded NRA and its allies argue that gun regulations only hurt law-abiding gun owners, since criminals simply ignore them. They say that since Congress stopped banning assault rifles in 2004, violent crime in America has fallen significantly, and shootings are also down slightly.

Meanwhile, gun-control advocates say limiting weapons will reduce gun-related crimes. Australia passed strict gun ownership laws after a massacre left 35 people dead in 1996. Since then, there have been no mass shootings, and the firearms murder and suicide rates have plummeted. An editorial in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* said the level of gun violence in the U.S. amounts to a public health crisis. The left-leaning magazine *Mother Jones* says it costs the U.S. \$229 billion each year.

