



## Mass shootings dominate the gun debate but are less than 1% of firearm deaths

Leandra Bernstein

March 24th 2021

One week after the spa shootings in Atlanta left eight Asian American women dead and days after a gunman killed ten people at a Boulder, Colorado supermarket, lawmakers gathered to debate gun control legislation. The hearing wasn't planned to coincide with the two mass shootings but senators inevitably focused on preventing the next one.

Several Republicans scorned background check proposals passed in the House arguing they would do nothing to prevent the next tragedy, but experts on both sides of the debate warned the focus on mass shootings distorts the bigger problem of addressing more prevalent forms of gun violence.

At a Judiciary Committee hearing Tuesday, Texas Republican Sen. Ted Cruz criticized Democrats for gun control measures that he claimed would not prevent the types of tragedies seen recently in Atlanta or Boulder, Colorado.

"Every time there's a shooting, we play this ridiculous theater where this committee gets together and proposes a bunch of laws that would do nothing to stop these murders," Cruz argued.

"What they propose not only does it not reduce crime, it makes it worse," the Texas senator continued, claiming that House-passed legislation on background checks would penalize law-abiding gun owners.

The two House bills passed with minimal bipartisan support earlier this month. One, HR 8, would establish universal background checks on almost all gun transfers, including unlicensed and private sellers. The second bill, HR 1446, would close the so-called "Charleston Loophole," which allows a gun sale to be processed if it takes the FBI more than three days to process the background check. Dylann Roof exploited this default approval to purchase the gun he used to kill nine people at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015.

Before the bill passed, House Republican conference secretary Rep. Richard Hudson of North Carolina argued that it "would do nothing to have stopped a single mass shooting in this country."

Amy Swearer, a legal fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, told lawmakers Tuesday that, except for the 2019 Odessa-Midland shooting spree in Texas, the House background checks "would not have played any meaningful role in preventing any mass public shooting in recent history."

While mass shootings are shocking and tragic reminders of the scope of gun violence, they make up less than 1% of deaths involving firearms. Every year, roughly 40,000 people die in incidents involving firearms. The majority of those deaths (61%) are suicides. Another one-third of gun deaths are homicides.

"The media tends to focus on these mass shootings because they are certainly what stands out and they seem like they represent the majority of gun deaths; they don't," said Lisa Geller, state affairs manager at the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence.

The number of mass shootings incidents has grown in recent years but typically accounts for around 400 fatalities, according to data from the [Gun Violence Archive](#). That's less than the number of women who are shot and killed by an intimate partner each year. The COVID-19 pandemic hasn't slowed down the trends in gun violence. Major cities, including Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia, reported a 50% increase in gun violence over last year and gun sales surged.

"As tragic as they are, mass shootings are not the real tragedy in the gun control debate," said Trevor Burrus, a research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. Legislation focused on addressing mass shootings misses the bigger marks of gang activity and drug wars that disproportionately impact urban communities, domestic violence and suicide.

"Essentially, going after mass shootings is a waste of a lot of legislative effort and time to not really look at the scope of the problem, if we're just talking about gun deaths," Burrus argued.

The real question is whether the proposed legislation to expand background checks would work to reduce the broader problem of gun violence.

Currently, all licensed gun sellers must submit background checks to the FBI on any gun purchase. Only 22 states and Washington, D.C., require universal background checks for all gun sales, including from private sellers and gun shows. The House bill would create a stricter national standard by expanding the background check requirement to unlicensed sales, including online and private sales.

Already, anyone who undergoes a background check must certify, under penalty of law, if they are a felon, fugitive, legal resident, if they were convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence, dishonorably discharges, institutionalized for mental illness, if they use marijuana or other controlled substances and if they are purchasing the firearm for someone else. Though typically only enforced in connection with another crime, lying on the background check form can result in a criminal conviction and up to five years in prison.

According to a [study](#) published by the National Institutes of Health, nearly a quarter of American gun owners obtained their most recently purchased firearm without a background check.

Proponents of background checks argue that universal background checks stop bad actors from buying guns and close a loophole that has allowed 80% of all firearms acquired for criminal purposes to be purchased through unlicensed sellers.

Chair of the House Gun Violence Prevention Task Force, Mike Thompson, D-Calif., argued that "background checks work and expanding them would only make more people safe from gun violence." The idea of expanding background checks is also favored by more than 90% of voters, Democrat and Republican.

The evidence is "inconclusive," as to whether stricter background checks would lead to fewer firearm deaths, according to a RAND Corporation study published last year. Researchers found moderate support that gun dealer background checks reduced firearm deaths but they were uncertain whether the same would apply to private sellers.

Part of the uncertainty comes from the patchwork of state laws on background checks. While some states have strict requirements, roughly two-thirds of crime guns recovered in those states with strong gun laws were originally sold in states with weak gun laws.

"Universal background checks are the foundation for every single gun law in this country," said Dakota Jablon, a suicide prevention specialist at the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence. "We know that other gun laws that are proven to reduce different forms of gun violence are still based on a background check system."

Extreme risk laws, which have bipartisan support in the House and Senate, depend on a comprehensive background check system in place, Jablon noted. The laws, which create an adjudication process to temporarily take guns away from someone considered to be a danger to themselves or others, have been found to prevent mass shootings, suicides and homicides in states that implemented them.

Despite most gun owners supporting universal background checks, many Second Amendment proponents have fought against them, arguing they are akin to a gun registry and could be used to confiscate firearms.

The House background check bills have an uncertain fate in the Senate where it would need all 50 Democrats and 10 Republicans to pass.

Meanwhile, Democratic lawmakers and President Joe Biden are pushing to fulfill campaign promises on gun control.

In the aftermath of the Boulder shooting, Biden said he was considering executive actions on gun control and strongly urged Congress to reinstate the ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. "I don't need to wait another minute, let alone an hour, to take commonsense steps that will save the lives in the future," Biden said Tuesday.

It's unclear what unilateral steps Biden will take. Sen. Diane Feinstein, D-Calif., reintroduced legislation Tuesday to ban assault weapons. There is growing attention on assault weapons ban after reports that the alleged shooter in Boulder bought a Ruger AR-556 days after a local ordinance expired that would have prohibited the purchase.

While long guns and rifles have been used in most high-profile mass shootings, they account for around 4% of firearm deaths.