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How likely is gun violence to kill the average American? The odds may surprise you

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February 15, 2018

A 19-year-old allegedly killed 17 of his former classmates at a Florida high school on Wednesday with an AR-15 rifle he purchased legally.

It was the deadliest school shooting in Florida history. The suspected gunman, Nikolas Cruz, had been known as a potential threat to the school, and teachers have bemoaned how they were powerless to stop him.

Cruz's victims join a growing number of people in the US that were intentionally killed at the end of a gun.

Below is how the lifetime odds of dying from gun violence (highlighted in red, suicides and accidents excluded) stack up against many causes of death for Americans:

Gun violence is a leading cause of death in America

CAUSE OF DEATH	LIFETIME ODDS	CAUSE OF DEATH	LIFETIME ODDS
Heart disease	1 in 6	Airplane, boat, and spaceship incidents	1 in 2,499
Cancer	1 in 7	Assault by sharp object	1 in 2,517
Any injury	1 in 19	Any force of nature	1 in 2,586
Chronic lung disease	1 in 26	Choking on food	1 in 3,461
Any accident	1 in 28	Bicycling	1 in 4,030
Stroke	1 in 29	Police/law enforcement	1 in 7,703
Alzheimer's disease	1 in 37	Accidental gunshot	1 in 8,349
Diabetes	1 in 51	Mass shooting	1 in 11,125
Influenza and pneumonia	1 in 72	Electricity/radiation/heat/pressure	1 in 15,210
Drugs	1 in 72	Heat wave	1 in 16,581
Kidney disease	1 in 82	Sharp objects	1 in 32,403
Poisoning (accidental, including drug overdoses)	1 in 86	Venomous animal or plant	1 in 44,459
Suicide	1 in 92	Foreign-born terrorist	1 in 45,785
Any motor vehicle incident	1 in 108	Tornado	1 in 60,000
Falling	1 in 122	Stinging by hornets, wasps, and bees	1 in 63,215
Alcohol	1 in 123	Cataclysmic storm	1 in 66,324
Murder	1 in 229	Asteroid strike (global impact)	1 in 75,000
Assault by gun	1 in 315	Bus, train, or streetcar	1 in 101,144
Riding inside a car, van, or truck	1 in 491	Dog attack	1 in 112,382
Suffocation	1 in 591	Legal execution	1 in 118,993
Pedestrian	1 in 611	Earthquake	1 in 130,000
Motorcycle	1 in 921	Lightning	1 in 161,831
Drowning	1 in 1,133	Asteroid strike (regional impact)	1 in 1,600,000
Fire or smoke	1 in 1,579	Shark attack	1 in 8,000,000

Note: Most odds based on 2015 death, population, and life expectancy data. Gun deaths were counted as mass shootings when four or more victims were shot. Terrorism odds based on 41-year average (1975-2015).

Sources: National Safety Council; National Center for Health Statistics; Alex Nowrasteh/Cato Institute; Stephen A. Nelson/Tulane University; "Natural Disasters"/Patrick L. Abbott; Gun Violence Archive

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Assaults by firearm kill about 13,000 people in the US each year, which translates to a roughly 1-in-315 lifetime chance of death from gun violence.

That's about 56% more likely than the risk of dying while riding inside a car, truck, or van over a lifetime. It's also more than 11 times higher than dying from any force of nature, such as a hurricane, tornado, earthquake, flood, or lightning strike.

These measures also suggest Americans are more likely to die from gun violence than the combined risks of drowning, fire and smoke, stabbing, choking on food, airplane crashes, animal attacks, and natural disasters.

Where the data come from

The chart above does not account for a person's specific behaviors, age, sex, location, or other factors that can shift the results; it's an average of the entire US population. But it clearly shows gun violence is a leading cause of death in the US.

Most of the data come from [an October 2017 report](#) by the National Safety Council and a [November 2017 report](#) by the National Center for Health Statistics' on causes of death in the US, primarily those that occurred in 2015. (The NSC report uses 2014 data where newer data wasn't available.)

[Mass shootings](#) aren't part of the above data sets, but the Gun Violence Archive project [keeps a sourced tally](#), which we've independently counted. The organization considers any event where four or more victims were injured (regardless of death) to be a mass shooting.

In 2015, some 333 mass shootings killed 367 people and injured 1,328 others. The statistics rose in 2016 to 383 mass shootings, 456 related deaths, and 1,537 injuries. In 2017, there were 346 mass shootings that led to 437 deaths and 1,802 injuries.

Foreign-born terrorism data comes from [Cato Institute terrorism data](#), and some natural-disaster data comes from [Tulane University](#).

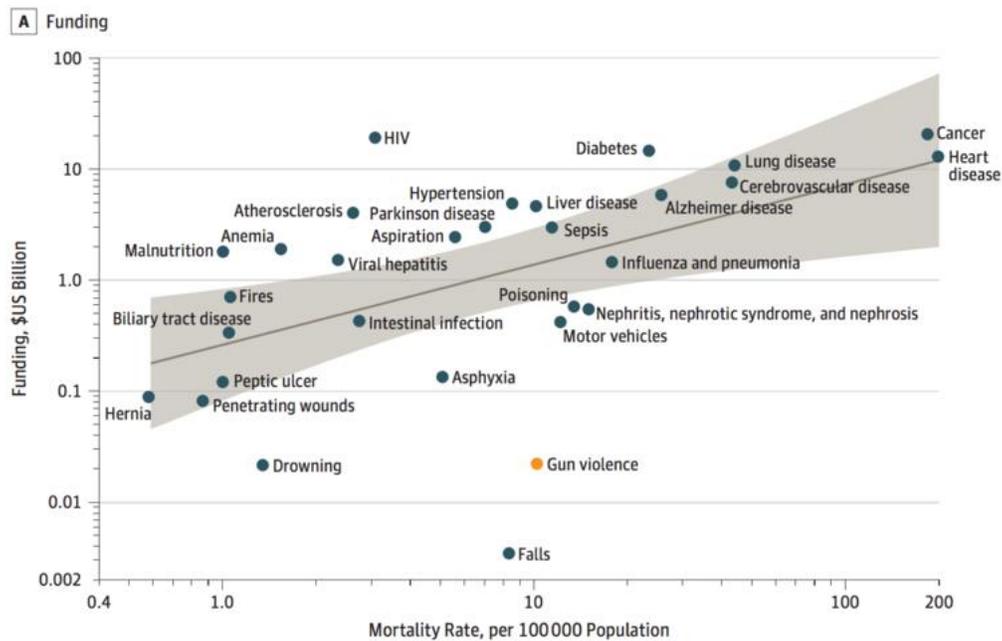
We calculated the lifetime odds of death by applying 2015 life expectancy and population numbers in the US, and our analysis assumes each cause of death won't change drastically in the near future. (Mortality data from prior years suggests these rankings are relatively consistent, with the exception of skyrocketing accidental poisonings due to [the opioid epidemic](#).)

A dearth of US gun violence research

Although gun violence is one of the leading causes of death in America, it is also one of the most poorly researched, according to [a January 2017 study](#) published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

"In relation to mortality rates, gun violence research was the least-researched cause of death and the second-least funded cause of death after falls," the study's authors wrote.

The study ascribed this dearth of research to restrictions — namely a 21-year-old congressional appropriations bill called the "[Dickey Amendment](#)" that stipulated "none of the funds made available for injury prevention and control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention may be used to advocate or promote gun control."



Research into gun violence is the most poorly funded relative to other causes of death. Dr. David E. Stark, Dr. Nigam H. Shah/JAMA

This and other federal funding restrictions are still active, hindering many scientists from understanding the problem.

"The fundamental, foundational work of documenting the full scale of the health consequences of firearms has not been done," Dr. Sandro Galea, an epidemiologist and the dean of the Boston University School of Public Health, told Mother Jones in a January 2017 story. "It's the kind of project that we do all the time. It just hasn't been done with firearms because there haven't been resources."

But what questions have been researched by private institutions like the Harvard Injury Control Research Center show a clear connection between gun ownership, gun availability, homicides, and violent death.

A roundup of gun control and violence studies by writer German Lopez at Vox shows Americans represent less than 5% of the world population but possess nearly 50% of the world's civilian-owned guns, police are about three times more likely to be killed in states with high gun ownership, countries with more guns see more gun deaths, and states with tighter gun control laws see fewer gun-related deaths.