



Abe's assassination shocks Japan, where gun control is strict and shootings are rare

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The assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is sending shockwaves around the world and especially through Japan, a country where gun regulations are strict and shootings are exceedingly rare.

Abe, who resigned due to health issues in 2020, was fatally shot in broad daylight on Friday while speaking at a campaign rally in the city of Nara. The police detained a suspect and retrieved a gun at the scene that appears to be homemade, broadcaster NHK reports.

Rates of gun ownership and gun violence in Japan are among the lowest in the world, and stand in stark contrast to those of the U.S.

For example: Just one person was killed by gun violence in Japan in 2021, according to the country's National Police Agency. The Gun Violence Archive recorded 45,034 U.S. firearm deaths that same year.

Abe's killing is "almost incomprehensible" in a country with a firearm death rate of 0.01 per 100,000 and an even lower homicide rate, wrote Iain Overton, the executive director of British NGO Action on Armed Violence, in a blog post on Friday.

"With its long tradition of gun control measures, and low homicides by firearm rates, this shooting will then not only rock Japan because of the high profile of the victim, but also because of the rarity of the event," he wrote.

In Japan guns are 'the exception, not the rule'

Japan was the first nation in the world to impose gun laws, according to Overton.

He traces those back to a 1588 measure banning civilians from owning swords and firearms. That was followed by centuries of decrees aimed at limiting the spread of guns that Western traders and missionaries had brought to the country, culminating in a 1958 federal law that banned almost all gun ownership and is still on the books today.

"The weapons law begins by stating 'No-one shall possess a fire-arm or firearms or a sword or swords', and very few exceptions are allowed," wrote David Kopel in a 1993 paper published in *Asia-Pacific Law Review*. Kopel, a constitutional law professor at Denver University Sturm College of Law and adjunct scholar at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, described Japan's gun control measures the "most stringent in the democratic world."

Japan prohibits private citizens from owning handguns, and only allows licensed hunters and target shooters to purchase shotguns or air rifles.

A person must be 18 to own a firearm, though there are exceptions for gun athletes over the age of 14. The law prohibits people from possessing a gun if they have declared bankruptcy.

And police in Japan have unlimited discretion to deny licenses to anyone who they have reasonable cause to suspect may present a danger to "other persons' lives or properties or to the public peace," according to Kopel. He also noted the public's high level of voluntary cooperation with gun control measures and police enforcement of them.

"All of this means Japan is very much a country where the gun is the exception, not the rule," Action on Armed Violence's Overton wrote.

According to a tracker from the University of Sydney, Japanese civilians held an estimated 310,400 legal and illegal guns in 2019, per a population of 126.9 million — or about 0.25 guns per 100 people.

The same researchers found that the total number of guns in the U.S. ranges between 265 million to 393 million, and as of 2017 amounted to an estimated 120.5 firearms per 100 people.

Just as very few people own guns in Japan, very few are involved in shootings.

In 2018 there were nine reported firearm deaths — including accidents and suicides — in Japan, compared with 39,740 in the U.S.

Homicides in general are rare in Japan, Overton notes, with a rate of 0.26 per 100,000 during that same year. (The U.S. rate was 7.5 per 100,000 as of 2020).