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## Gun ownership in the U.S.: A primer

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After last week's mass shooting in San Bernardino, Calif., the national conversation about gun control has become even more urgent.

On Sunday night, President Obama included remarks about gun control in his Oval Office address on terrorism: "We also need to make it harder for people to buy powerful assault weapons. I know there are some who reject any gun-safety measures, but the fact is that our intelligence and law-enforcement agencies ... cannot identify every would-be mass shooter ... What we can do, and must do, is make it harder for them to kill."

The question, of course, is what that would mean in a country where gun ownership is seen as a fact of life.

Under the Obama administration, the United States has seen a significant uptick in gun sales. However, the United States has long been a global outlier in terms of its rates of gun ownership. According to the 2007 Small Arms Survey, the United States had an average of 88 guns per 100 people, giving us the highest gun ownership rate in the world. Today, the number may be as high as 116, though most of those weapons are owned by a minority of citizens.

The United States is home to roughly 35 to 50 percent of the world's civilian-owned guns, even though it holds less than 5 percent of the world's population, and guns are comparatively easy to obtain. To purchase a gun in the majority of states, one need only to be of age, pass the FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check and fill out Form 4437, a firearms transaction record. However, background checks are not required for private sales, including those conducted at gun shows). Even al-Qaeda has urged its followers to take advantage of our relaxed gun laws.

Defenders of gun ownership usually point first to the Second Amendment of the Constitution, which affirms that "the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed" (though whether this provision protected the individual right to own arms or the collective right of the

people to arm a militia has long been debated). Many supporters are also quick to point out that stricter gun laws have not ended gun violence in cities such as Chicago and Washington, and for many Americans, supporting gun rights remains much more about fighting government intrusion than guns themselves.

On the other side, gun-control advocates cite statistics such as the 30,000-plus people who die from firearms each year, including up to 100 children in accidental shootings. They lament the outsize power of the National Rifle Association and point to countries such as Australia, where high levels of gun ownership have been sharply reduced by buyback programs and legislation, or Japan, where gun-control laws are strict and shooting deaths are almost nonexistent.

The debate on guns has played out many times before. But regardless of where one falls, the fact remains that U.S. gun ownership is exceptionally high and growing, even as certain tighter gun-control measures enjoy wide support across the country.

So why does the United States have more guns per capita than anywhere else in the world? What can we do to make gun ownership less dangerous to the average citizen? What new policies are being considered, and will any have a real effect?

This week we'll hear from:

Tom Zoellner, author and journalist,

Jay Wachtel, former agent at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives,

Philip Alpers, founding director of GunPolicy.org,

Jonathan Blanks, research associate in Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice,

Michael Waldman, president of the Brennan Center for Justice,

Charles C. W. Cooke, staff writer at National Review.