

The Washington Post

Twelve facts about guns and mass shootings in the United States

By: Ezra Klein - December 14, 2012

When we first collected much of this data, it was after the Aurora, Colo. shootings, and the air was thick with calls to avoid “politicizing” the tragedy. That is code, essentially, for “don’t talk about reforming our gun control laws.”

Let’s be clear: That is a form of politicization. When political actors construct a political argument that threatens political consequences if other political actors pursue a certain political outcome, that is, almost by definition, a politicization of the issue. It’s just a form of politicization favoring those who prefer the status quo to stricter gun control laws.

Since then, there have been more horrible, high-profile shootings. Jovan Belcher, a linebacker for the Kansas City Chiefs, took his girlfriend’s life and then his own. In Oregon, Jacob Tyler Roberts entered a mall holding a semi-automatic rifle and yelling “I am the shooter.” And, in Connecticut, at least 27 are dead — including 18 children — after a man opened fire at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

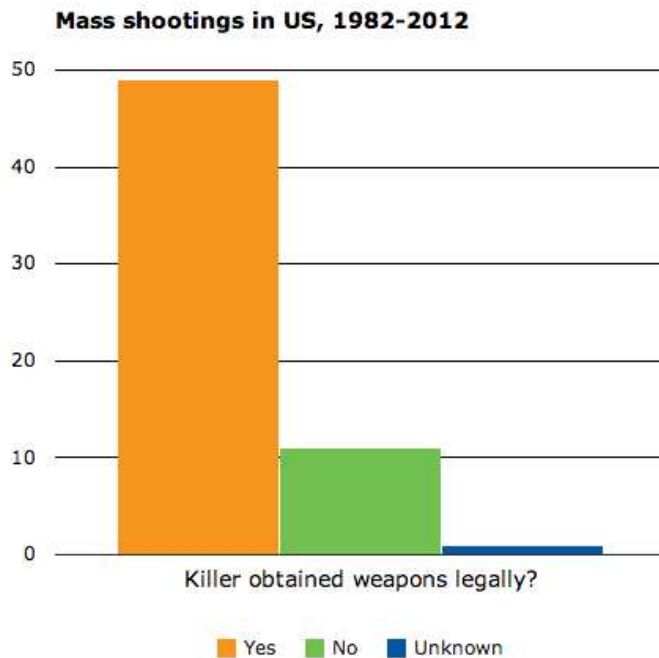
If roads were collapsing all across the United States, killing dozens of drivers, we would surely see that as a moment to talk about what we could do to keep roads from collapsing. If terrorists were detonating bombs in port after port, you can be sure Congress would be working to upgrade the nation’s security measures. If a plague was ripping through communities, public-health officials would be working feverishly to contain it.

Only with gun violence do we respond to repeated tragedies by saying that mourning is acceptable but discussing how to prevent more tragedies is not. “Too soon,” howl supporters of loose gun laws. But as others have observed, talking about how to stop mass shootings in the aftermath of a string of mass shootings isn’t “too soon.” It’s much too late.

What follows here isn’t a policy agenda. It’s simply a set of facts — many of which complicate a search for easy answers — that should inform the discussion that we desperately need to have.

1. Shooting sprees are not rare in the United States.

Mother Jones has tracked and mapped every shooting spree in the last three decades. “Since 1982, there have been at least 61 mass murders carried out with firearms across the country, with the killings unfolding in 30 states from Massachusetts to Hawaii,” they found. And in most cases, the killers had obtained their weapons legally:



2. 15 of the 25 worst mass shootings in the last 50 years took place in the United States.

Time has the full list here. In second place is Finland, with two entries.

3. Lots of guns don't necessarily mean lots of shootings, as you can see in Israel and Switzerland.*

As David Lamp writes at Cato, "In Israel and Switzerland, for example, a license to possess guns is available on demand to every law-abiding adult, and guns are easily obtainable in both nations. Both countries also allow widespread carrying of concealed firearms, and yet, admits Dr. Arthur Kellerman, one of the foremost medical advocates of gun control, Switzerland and Israel 'have rates of homicide that are low despite rates of home firearm ownership that are at least as high as those in the United States.'"

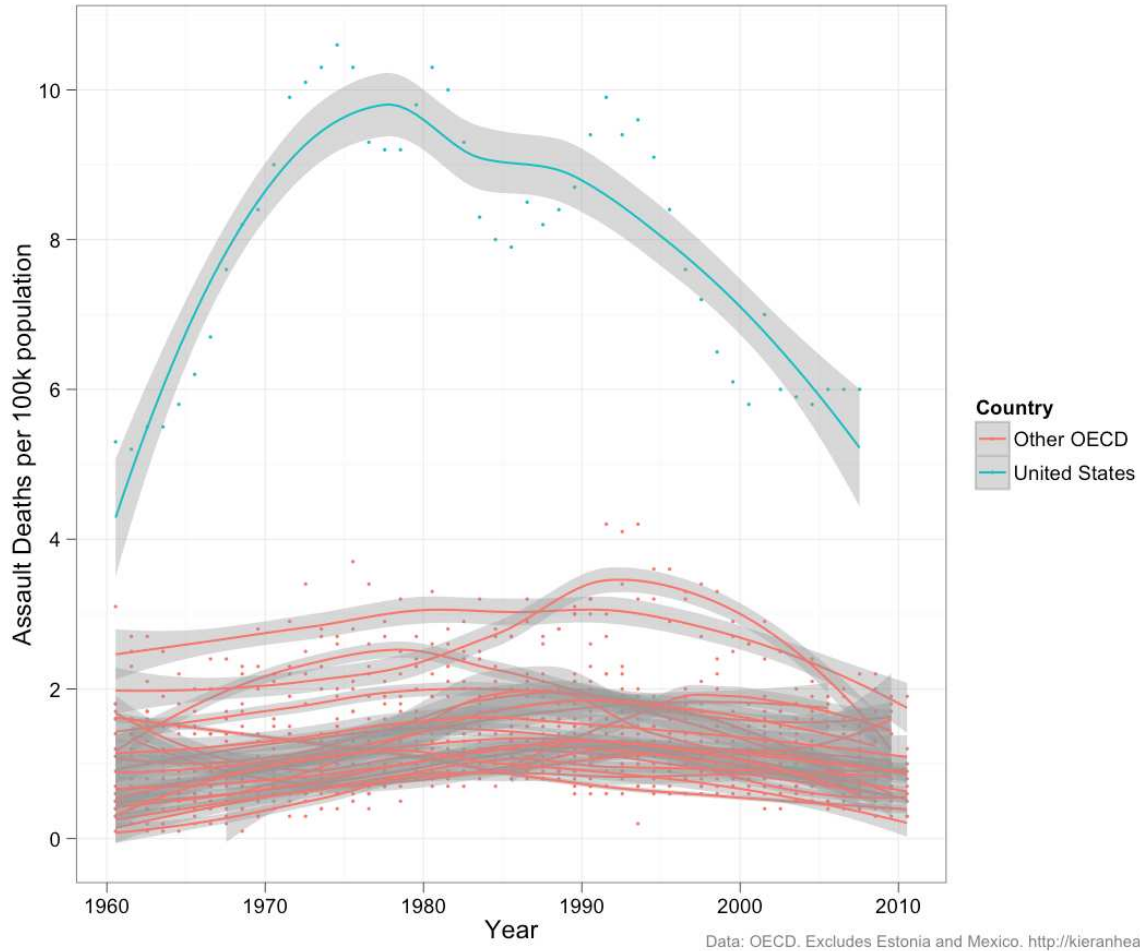
**Correction: The info is out-of-date, if not completely wrong. Israel and Switzerland have tightened their gun laws substantially, and now pursue an entirely different approach than the United States. More details here. I apologize for the error.*

4. Of the 11 deadliest shootings in the US, five have happened from 2007 onward.

That doesn't include Friday's shooting in Sandy Hook, Connecticut. The AP put the earlyreported death toll at 27, which would make it the second-deadliest mass shooting in US history.

5. America is an unusually violent country. But we're not as violent as we used to be.

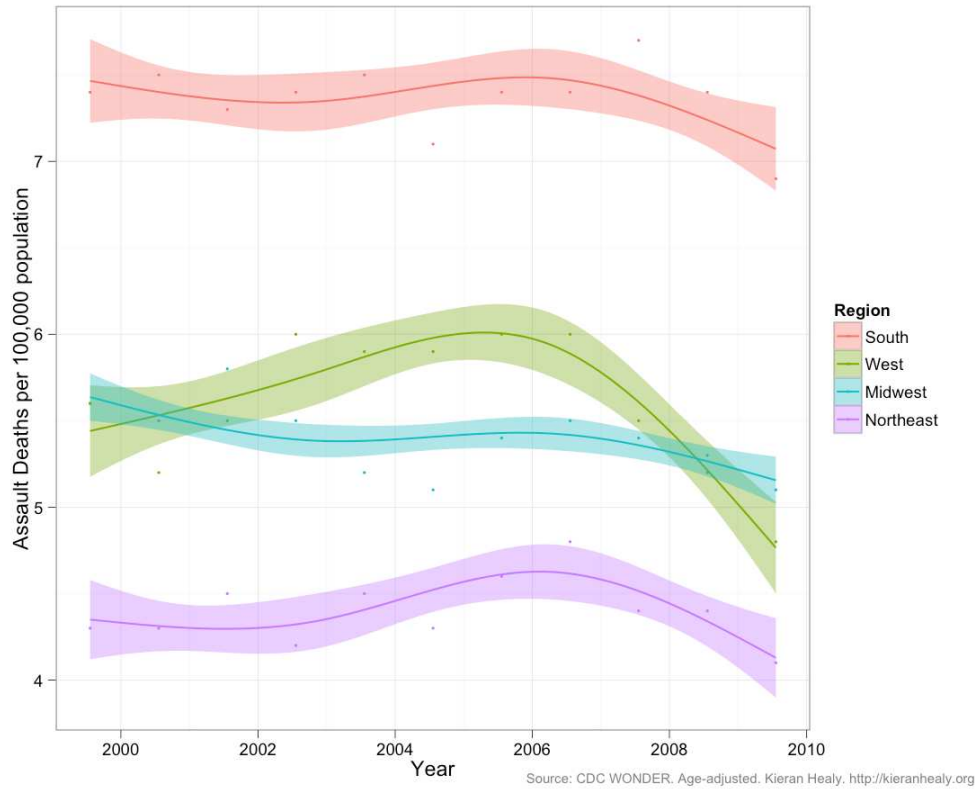
Kieran Healy, a sociologist at Duke University, made this graph of "deaths due to assault" in the United States and other developed countries. We are a clear outlier.



As Healy writes, “The most striking features of the data are (1) how much more violent the U.S. is than other OECD countries (except possibly Estonia and Mexico, not shown here), and (2) the degree of change—and recently, decline—there has been in the U.S. time series considered by itself.”

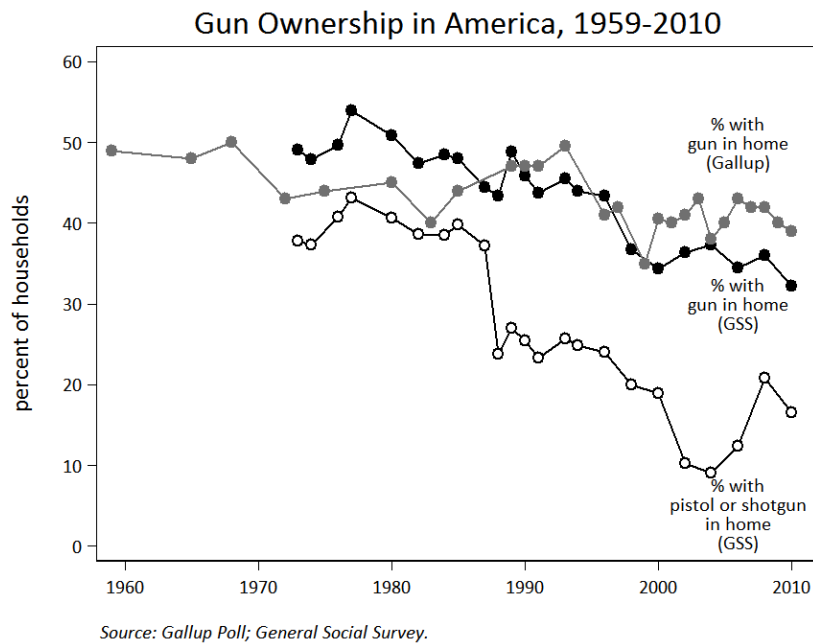
6. The South is the most violent region in the United States.

In a subsequent post, Healy drilled further into the numbers and looked at deaths due to assault in different regions of the country. Just as the United States is a clear outlier in the international context, the South is a clear outlier in the national context:



7. Gun ownership in the United States is declining overall.

“For all the attention given to America’s culture of guns, *ownership of firearms is at or near all-time lows*,” writes political scientist Patrick Egan. The decline is most evident on the General Social Survey, though it also shows up on polling from Gallup, as you can see on this graph:



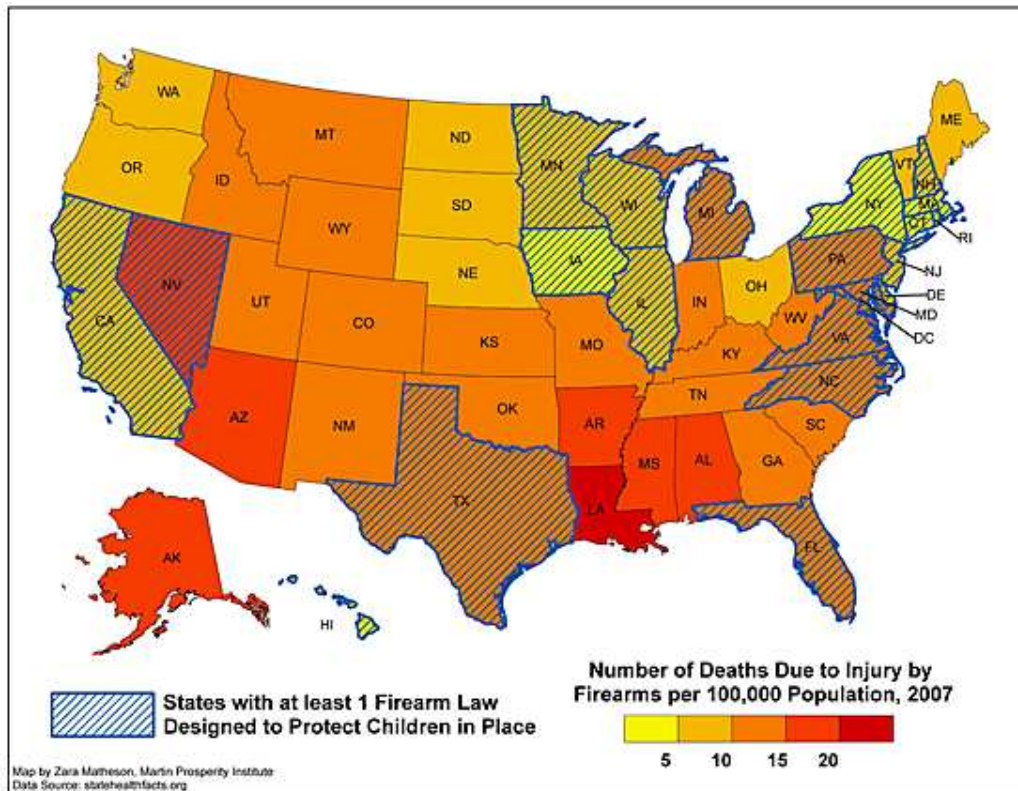
The bottom line, Egan writes, is that “long-term trends suggest that we are in fact currently experiencing a *waning* culture of guns and violence in the United States. “

8. More guns tend to mean more homicide.

The Harvard Injury Control Research Center assessed the literature on guns and homicide and found that there’s substantial evidence that indicates more guns means more murders. This holds true whether you’re looking at different countries or different states. Citations here.

9. States with stricter gun control laws have fewer deaths from gun-related violence.

Last year, economist Richard Florida dove deep into the correlations between gun deaths and other kinds of social indicators. Some of what he found was, perhaps, unexpected: Higher populations, more stress, more immigrants, and more mental illness were not correlated with more deaths from gun violence. But one thing he found was, perhaps, perfectly predictable: States with tighter gun control laws appear to have fewer gun-related deaths. The disclaimer here is that correlation is not causation. But correlations can be suggestive:



“The map overlays the map of firearm deaths above with gun control restrictions by state,” explains Florida. “It highlights states which have one of three gun control restrictions in place – assault weapons’ bans, trigger locks, or safe storage requirements. Firearm deaths are significantly lower in states with stricter gun control legislation. Though the sample sizes are small, we find substantial negative correlations between firearm deaths and states that ban assault weapons (-.45), require trigger locks (-.42), and mandate safe storage requirements for guns (-.48).”

10. Gun control, in general, has not been politically popular.

Since 1990, Gallup has been asking Americans whether they think gun control laws should be stricter. The answer, increasingly, is that they don't. "The percentage in favor of making the laws governing the sale of firearms 'more strict' fell from 78% in 1990 to 62% in 1995, and 51% in 2007," reports Gallup. "In the most recent reading, Gallup in 2010 found 44% in favor of stricter laws. In fact, in 2009 and again last year, the slight majority said gun laws should either remain the same or be made less strict."

Gun Laws

In general, do you feel that the laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more strict, less strict, or kept as they are now?

■ % More strict ■ % Less strict/Kept as now

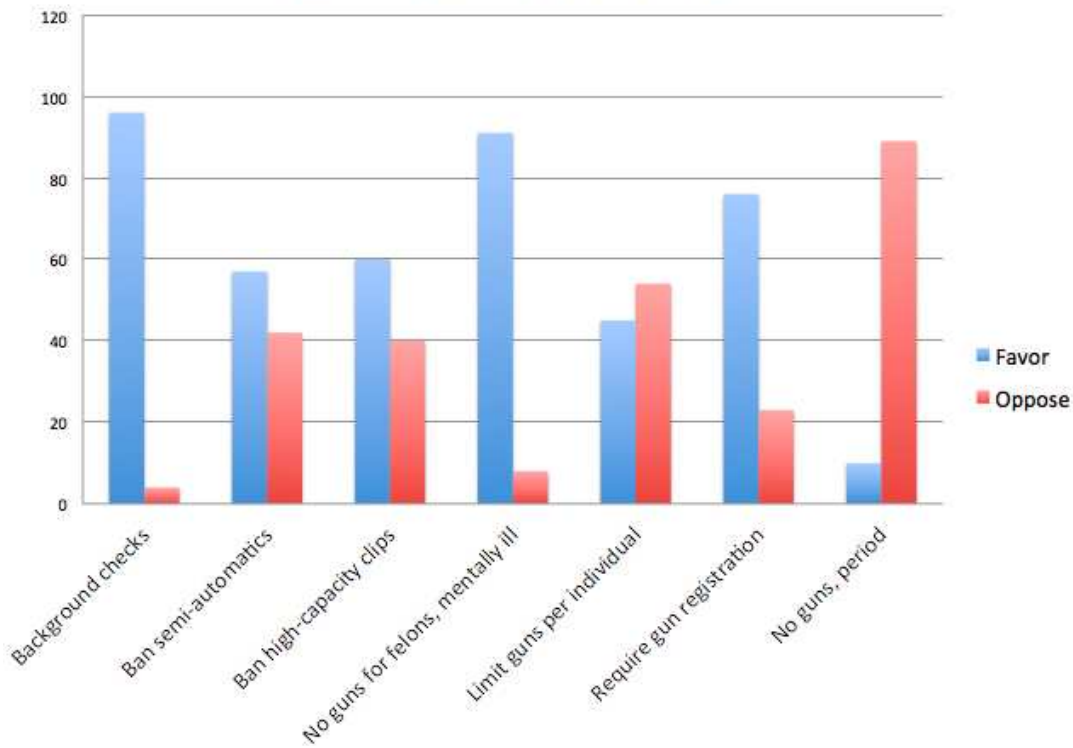


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11. But particular policies to control guns often are.

An August CNN/ORC poll asked respondents whether they favor or oppose a number of specific policies to restrict gun ownership. And when you drill down to that level, many policies, including banning the manufacture and possession of semi-automatic rifles, are popular.

Public supports many gun control policies

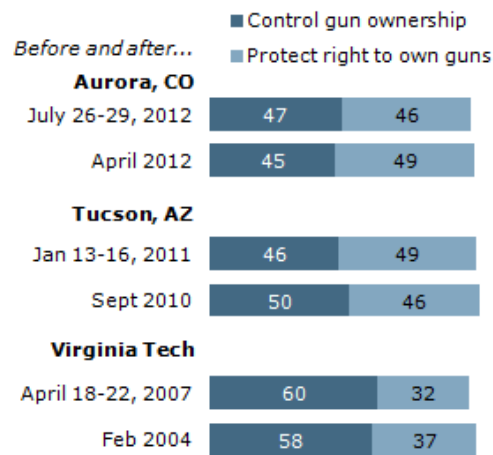


12. Shootings don't tend to substantially affect views on gun control.

That, at least, is what the Pew Research Center found:

Shootings Don't Shift Views on Gun Control

What do you think is more important?



PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 26-29, 2012.