

America's gun problem, explained

A few hours after the [Umpqua Community College shooting](#), President Barack Obama yet again took the lectern to address the nation on yet another mass shooting in America, and he made no effort to hide his [anger and frustration](#) at this very American routine.

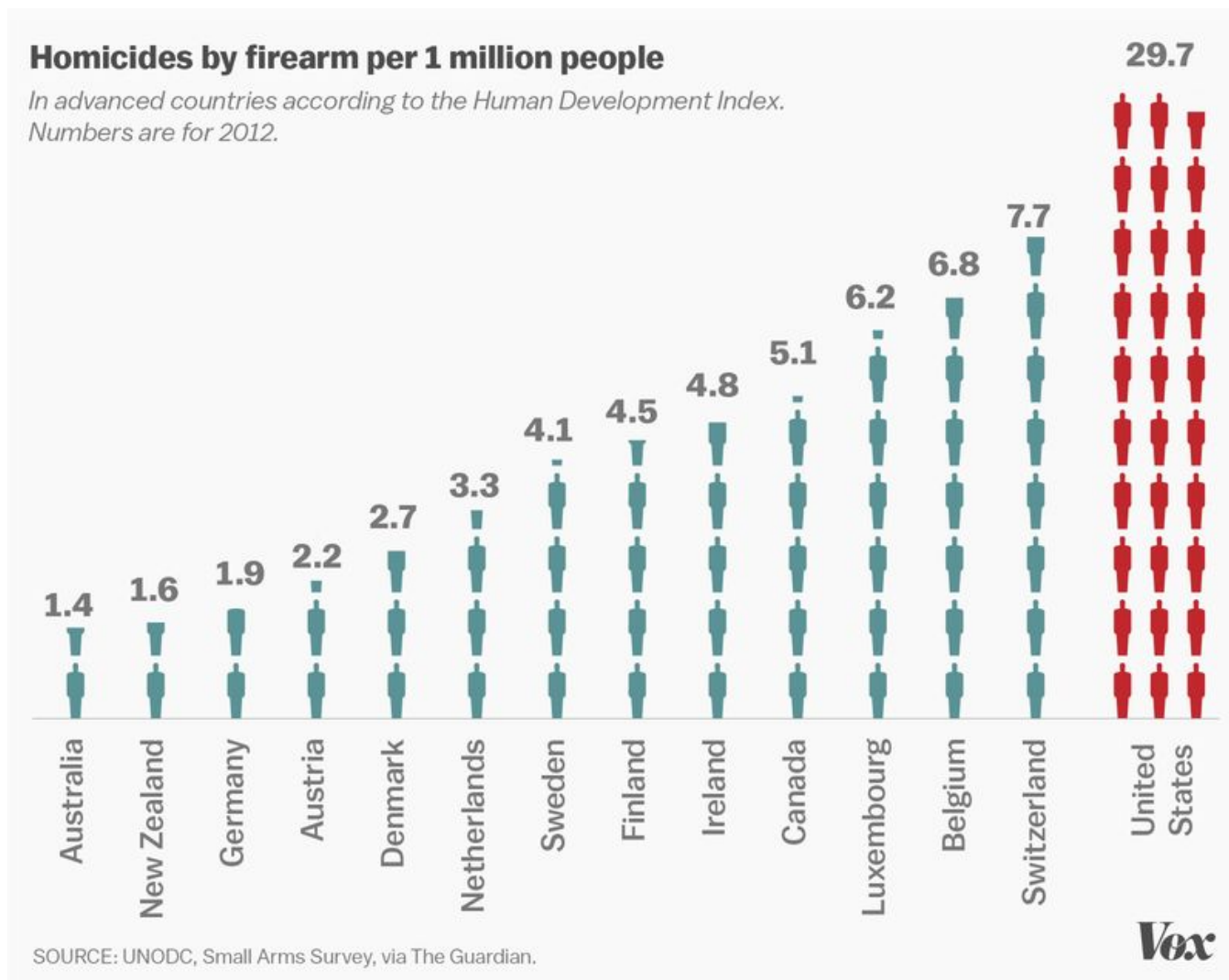
"As I said just a few months ago, and I said a few months before that, and I said each time we see one of these mass shootings, our thoughts and prayers are not enough," Obama said. "It does not capture the heartache and grief and anger that we should feel. And it does nothing to prevent this carnage from being inflicted someplace else in America next week or a couple of months from now."

This is a point that, by now, Americans are very familiar with. After every single mass shooting, there's a call for more gun control. Maybe some bills get introduced. Critics respond with concerns that the government — and usually Obama in particular — is trying to take away their guns. The debate stalls. Nothing seems to happen, particularly on a national scale.

Why is it that for all the outrage and mourning with every mass shooting, nothing seems to change? To understand that, it's important to grasp not just the stunning statistics about gun ownership and gun violence in the United States, but America's very unique relationship with guns — unlike that of any other developed country — and how it plays out in our politics to ensure, seemingly against all odds, that our culture and laws continue to drive the routine gun violence that marks American life.

1) America's gun problem is completely unique

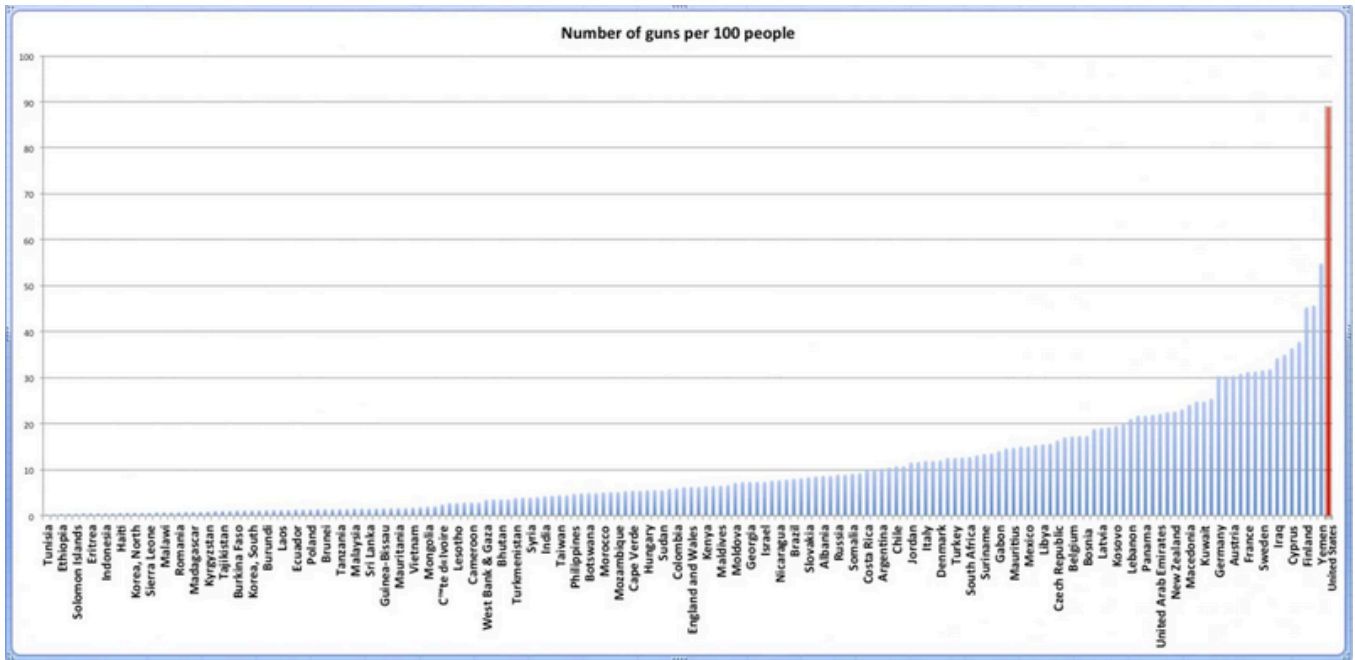
No other developed country in the world has nearly the same rate of gun violence as does America. The US has nearly six times the number of gun homicides as Canada, more than seven times as Sweden, and nearly 16 times as Germany, according to [UN data](#) compiled by the Guardian. (These gun deaths are a big reason America has a [much higher overall homicide rate](#), which includes non-gun deaths, than other developed nations.)



Javier Zarracina/Vox

To understand why that is, there's another important statistic: The US has by far the highest number of privately owned guns in the world. Estimated in 2007, the number of civilian-owned firearms in the US was 88.8 guns per 100 people, meaning there was almost one privately owned gun per American and more than one per American adult. The world's second-ranked country was Yemen, a quasi-failed state torn by civil war, where there were 54.8 guns per 100 people.

Another way of looking at that: Americans make up about 4.43 percent of the world's population, yet own roughly 42 percent of all the world's privately held firearms.

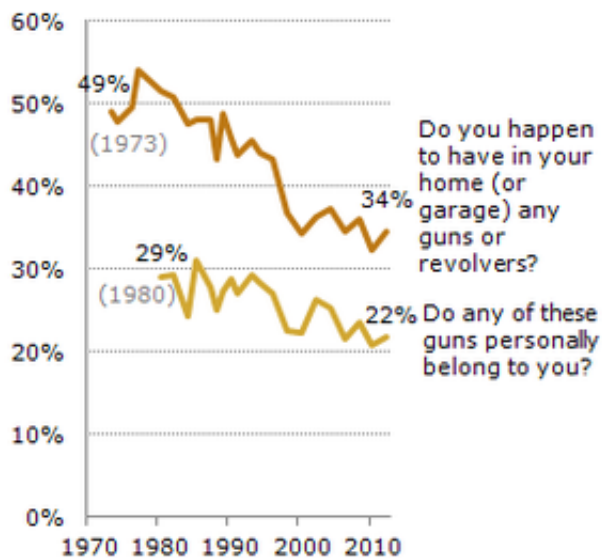


[Max Fisher/Washington Post](#)

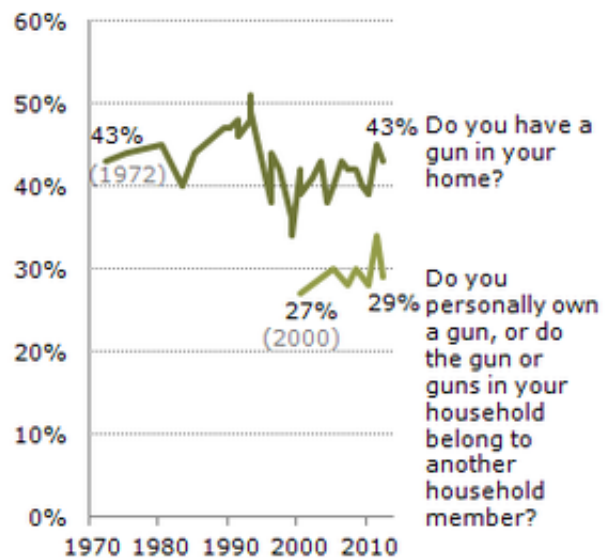
That does not, however, mean that every American adult actually owns guns. In fact, gun ownership is concentrated among a minority of the US population — as [surveys](#) from the Pew Research Center and General Social Survey suggest.

Survey Trends in Gun Ownership Rates

General Social Survey



Gallup



PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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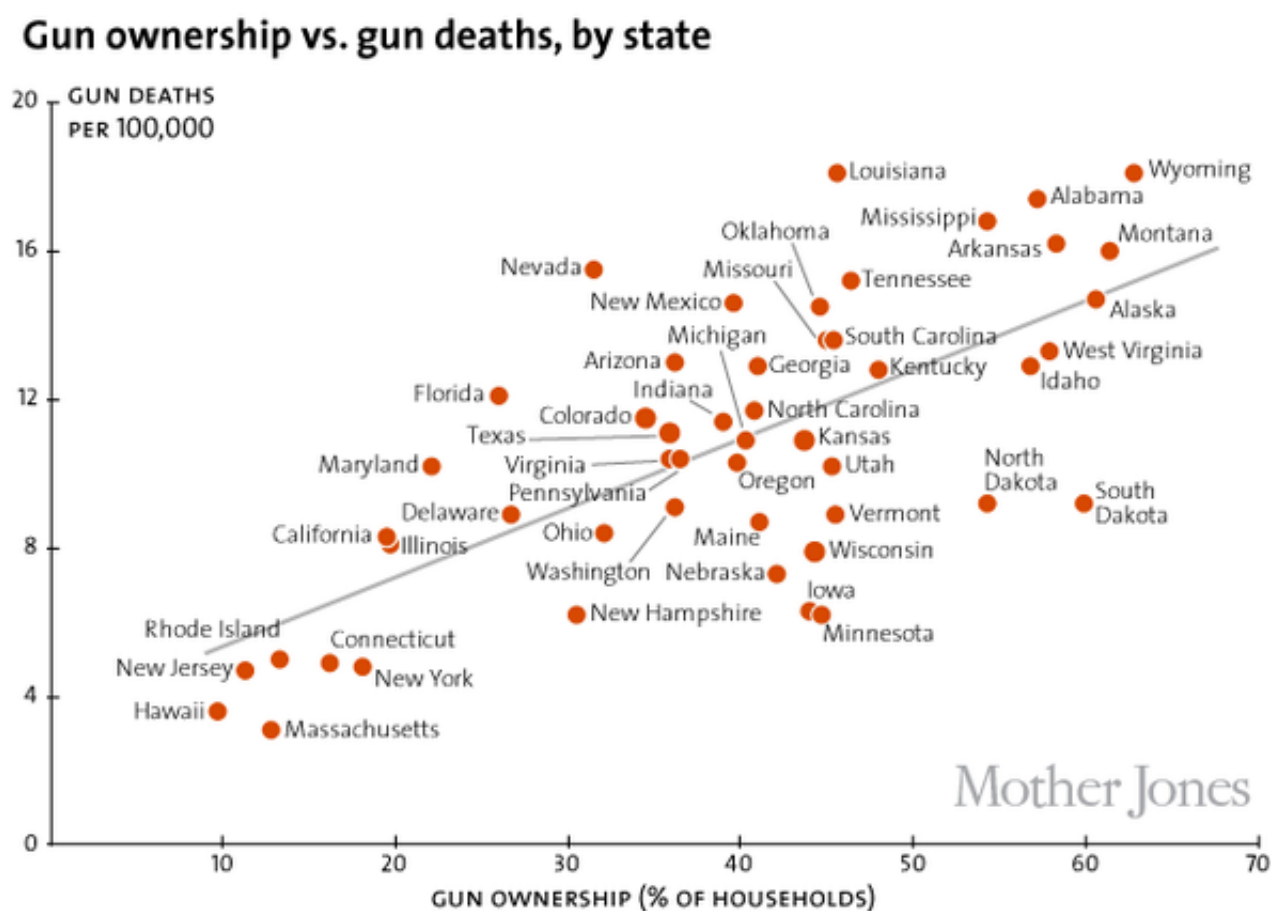
These three basic facts demonstrate America's unique gun culture. There is a very strong correlation between gun ownership and gun violence — a relationship that

researchers argue is at least partly causal. And American gun ownership is beyond anything else in the world. At the same time, these guns are concentrated among a passionate minority, who are typically the loudest critics against any form of gun control and who scare legislators into voting against such measures.

2) More guns mean more gun deaths. Period.

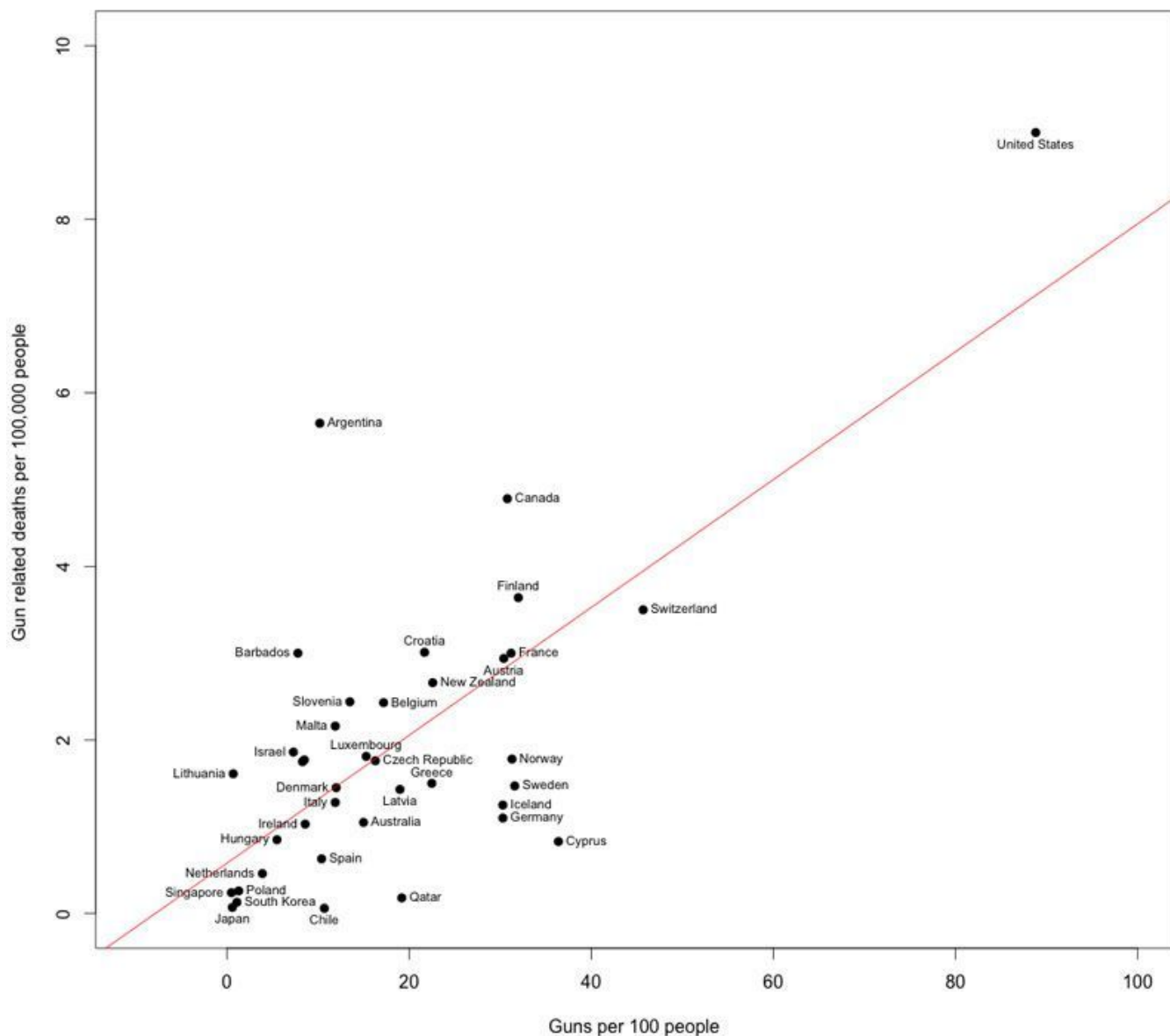
The research on this is overwhelmingly clear. No matter how you look at the data, more guns means more gun deaths.

This is apparent when you look at state-by-state data within the United States, as this chart from [Mother Jones](#) demonstrates:



[Mother Jones](#)

And it's clear when you look at the data across developed nations, as this other chart by [Tewksbury Lab](#) shows:



[Tewksbury Lab](#)

Opponents of gun control tend to point to other factors to explain America's unusual gun violence: mental illness, for example. Jonathan Metzl, a mental health expert at Vanderbilt University, [told](#) me that this is just not the case. People with mental illnesses are more likely to be victims, not perpetrators, of violence. And while it's true that an extraordinary amount of mass shooters ([up to 60 percent](#)) have some kind of psychiatric or psychological symptoms, Metzl points out that [other factors](#) are much better predictors of gun violence: substance abuse, poverty, history of violence, and, yes, [access to guns](#).

Another argument you sometimes hear is that these shootings would happen less frequently if even more people had guns, thus enabling them to defend themselves from the shooting.

But, again, the data shows this is simply not true. High gun ownership rates do not reduce gun deaths, but rather tend to coincide with increases in gun deaths. And [multiple simulations](#) have demonstrated that most people, if placed in an active shooter situation while armed, will not be able to stop the situation, and may in fact do little more than get themselves killed in the process.

This video, from [ABC News](#), shows one such simulation, in which people repeatedly fail to shoot an active shooter before they're shot:

The relationship between gun ownership rates and gun violence rates is well established. Reviews of the evidence by the [Harvard School of Public Health's Injury Control Research Center](#) have consistently found that when controlling for variables such as socioeconomic factors and other crime, places with more guns have more gun deaths.

"Within the United States, a wide array of empirical evidence indicates that more guns in a community leads to more homicide," David Hemenway, the Injury Control Research Center's director, wrote in [Private Guns, Public Health](#).

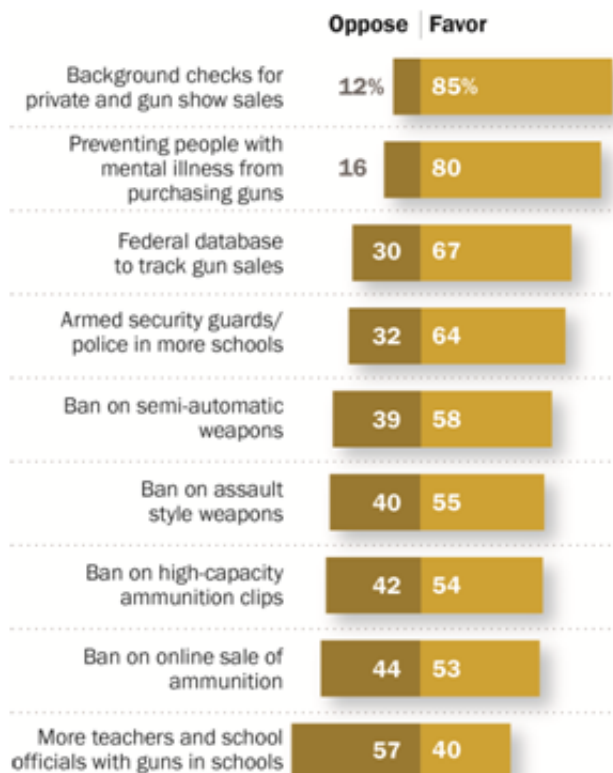
Experts [widely believe](#) this is the consequence of America's relaxed laws and culture surrounding guns: Making more guns more accessible means more guns, and more guns means more deaths. Researchers have found this is true not just with gun homicides, but also with [suicides](#), [domestic violence](#), and even [violence against police](#). To deal with those problems, America will have to not only make guns less accessible, but likely *reduce* the number of guns in the US as well.

But even with the outrage over gun massacres, the sense that enough is enough, and the clear evidence that the problem is America's high gun ownership rates, there hasn't been significant legislation to help solve the problem. The reasons for that are more complex than you might think.

3) Americans tend to support measures to restrict guns, but that doesn't translate into laws

If you ask Americans how they feel about specific gun control measures, they will often say that they support them. According to [Pew Research Center surveys](#), most people in the US support background checks, bans on assault-style weapons, bans on high-capacity ammunition clips, bans on online sales of ammunition, and a federal database to track gun sales.

Broad Public Support for Many Gun Policy Proposals



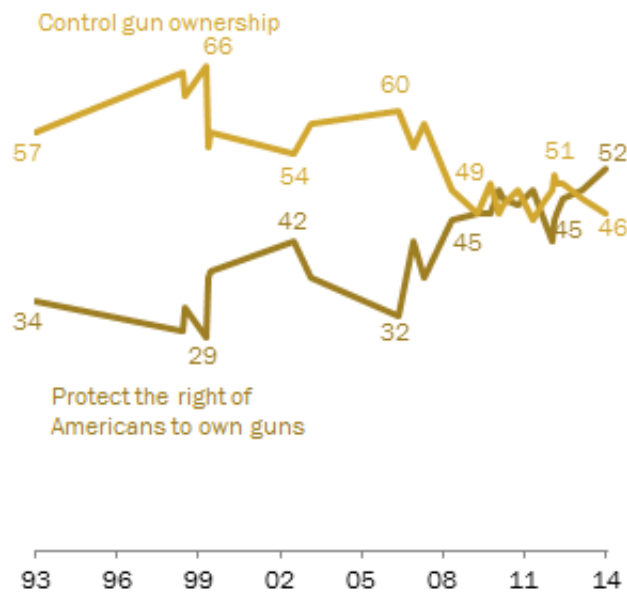
PEW RESEARCH CENTER Jan. 9-13, 2013.

Pew Research Center

So why don't these measures ever get turned into law? That's because they run into another political issue: Americans, increasingly, tend to support the abstract idea of the right to own guns.

Two Years After Newtown, A Shift in Favor of Gun Rights

% saying it is more important to ...



Survey conducted Dec. 3-7, 2014.

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This is part of how gun control opponents are able to kill even legislation that would introduce the most popular measures, such as background checks that include private sales (which have 85 percent support, according to Pew): They're able to portray the law as contrary to the right to own guns, and galvanize a backlash against it.

This kind of problem isn't unique to guns. For example, although most Americans say they [don't like Obamacare](#), most of them do in fact like the [specific policies in the health-care law](#). The problem is these specific policies have been [masked](#) by rhetoric about a "government takeover of health care" and "death panels." Since most Americans don't have time to verify these claims, especially when they involve a massive bill with lots of moving parts, enough end up believing in the catchphrases and scary arguments to stop the legislation from moving forward.

Of course, it's also the case that some Americans simply oppose *any* gun control laws. And while this group is generally outnumbered by those who support gun control, the opponents tend to be much more passionate about the issue than the supporters — and they're backed by a very powerful political lobby.

4) The gun lobby as we know it is relatively recent but enormously powerful



Mark Wilson/Getty Images

A man wears an NRA hat while showing his support for gun rights in front of the US Supreme Court.

The single most powerful political organization when it comes to guns is, undoubtedly, the **National Rifle Association**. The NRA has an enormous stranglehold over conservative politics in America, and that development is more recent than you might think.

The NRA was, for much of its early history, more of a sporting club than a serious political force against gun control, and **even supported some gun restrictions**. In 1934, NRA president Karl Frederick was quoted as **saying**, "I do not believe in the general promiscuous toting of guns. I think it should be sharply restricted and only under licenses."

"The NRA, for much of its early history, supported some gun restrictions"

A 1977 revolt within the organization changed everything. As crime rose in the 1960s and '70s, calls for more gun control grew as well. NRA members worried new restrictions on guns would keep coming after the historic **1968 law** — eventually ending, they feared, with the government's seizure of all firearms in America. So members mobilized, installing a hard-liner known as Harlon Carter in the leadership,

forever changing the NRA into the gun lobby we know today.

This foundation story is crucial for understanding why the NRA is near-categorically opposed to the regulation of private firearms. It fears that popular and seemingly common-sense regulations, such as banning assault-style weapons or even a federal database of gun purchases, are not really about saving lives but are in fact a potential first step toward ending *all* private gun ownership in America, which the NRA views — wrongly, in the minds of some [legal experts](#) — as a violation of the Second Amendment of the US Constitution.

So any time there's an attempt to impose new forms of gun control, the NRA rallies gun owners and other opponents of gun control to kill these bills. These gun owners make up a minority of the population: anywhere from 34 to 43 percent of households, depending on which survey one uses. But that population is a large and active enough constituency, particularly within the Republican base, to make many legislators fear that a poor grade from the NRA will end their careers.

As a result, conservative media and politicians [take](#) the NRA's support — especially the coveted A-to-F ratings the organization gives out — very, very seriously. Politicians will go to sometimes absurd length to show their support for gun rights. This year, for example, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) starred in a video, from [IJ Review](#), in which he cooked bacon with — this is not a joke — a machine gun.

Although several campaigns have [popped up](#) over the years to try to counteract the NRA, none have come close to capturing the kind of influential hold that the organization has. Some of the groups — such as [StopTheNRA.com](#), in part [funded](#) by Democratic donor Ken Lerer — didn't even last a few years.

Kristin Goss, author of [The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know](#), said this might be changing. She [argued](#) that newer gun control groups like [Everytown for Gun Safety](#) and [Americans for Responsible Solutions](#) are much more organized, are better funded, and have more grassroots support than gun control groups have had in her 20 years covering this issue. As a result, Democrats at the state and federal level seem [much more willing](#) to discuss gun control.

""In blue states, gun laws are getting stricter. And in red states, in some cases, the gun laws are getting looser.""

But supporters of gun control face a huge obstacle: far more passionate opponents. As Republican strategist Grover Norquist [said](#) in 2000, "The question is intensity versus preference. You can always get a certain percentage to say they are in favor of some

gun controls. But are they going to vote on their 'control' position?" Probably not, Norquist suggested, "but for that 4-5 percent who care about guns, they will vote on this."

What's behind that passion? Goss, who's also a political scientist at Duke University, suggested that it's a sense of tangible loss — gun owners feel like the government is going to take *their* guns and rights. In comparison, gun control advocates are motivated by more abstract notions of reducing gun violence — although, Goss noted, the victims of mass shootings and their families have begun putting a face on these policies by engaging more actively in advocacy work, which could make the gun control movement feel more relatable.

There is an exception at the state level, where legislatures have passed laws imposing (and relaxing) restrictions on guns. In the past year, for instance, [Washington state](#) and [Oregon](#) passed laws ensuring all guns have to go through background checks, including those sold between individuals. "There's a lot more going on than Congress," Goss said. "In blue states, gun laws are getting stricter. And in red states, in some cases, the gun laws are getting looser."

Still, the NRA's influence and its army of supporters push many of America's legislators, particularly at the federal level and red states, away from gun control measures — even though some countries that passed these policies have seen a lot of success with them.

5) Other developed countries have had huge successes with gun control

In 1996, a 28-year-old man walked into a cafe in [Port Arthur, Australia](#), ate lunch, pulled a semi-automatic rifle out of his bag, and opened fire on the crowd, killing 35 people and wounding 23 more. It was the worst mass shooting in Australia's history.

Australian lawmakers responded with [new legislation](#) that, among other provisions, banned certain types of firearms, such as automatic and semi-automatic rifles and shotguns. The Australian government confiscated 650,000 of these guns through a gun buyback program, in which it purchased firearms from gun owners. It established a registry of all guns owned in the country and required a permit for all new firearm purchases. (This is much further than bills typically proposed in the US, which almost never make a serious attempt to *immediately* reduce the number of guns in the country.)

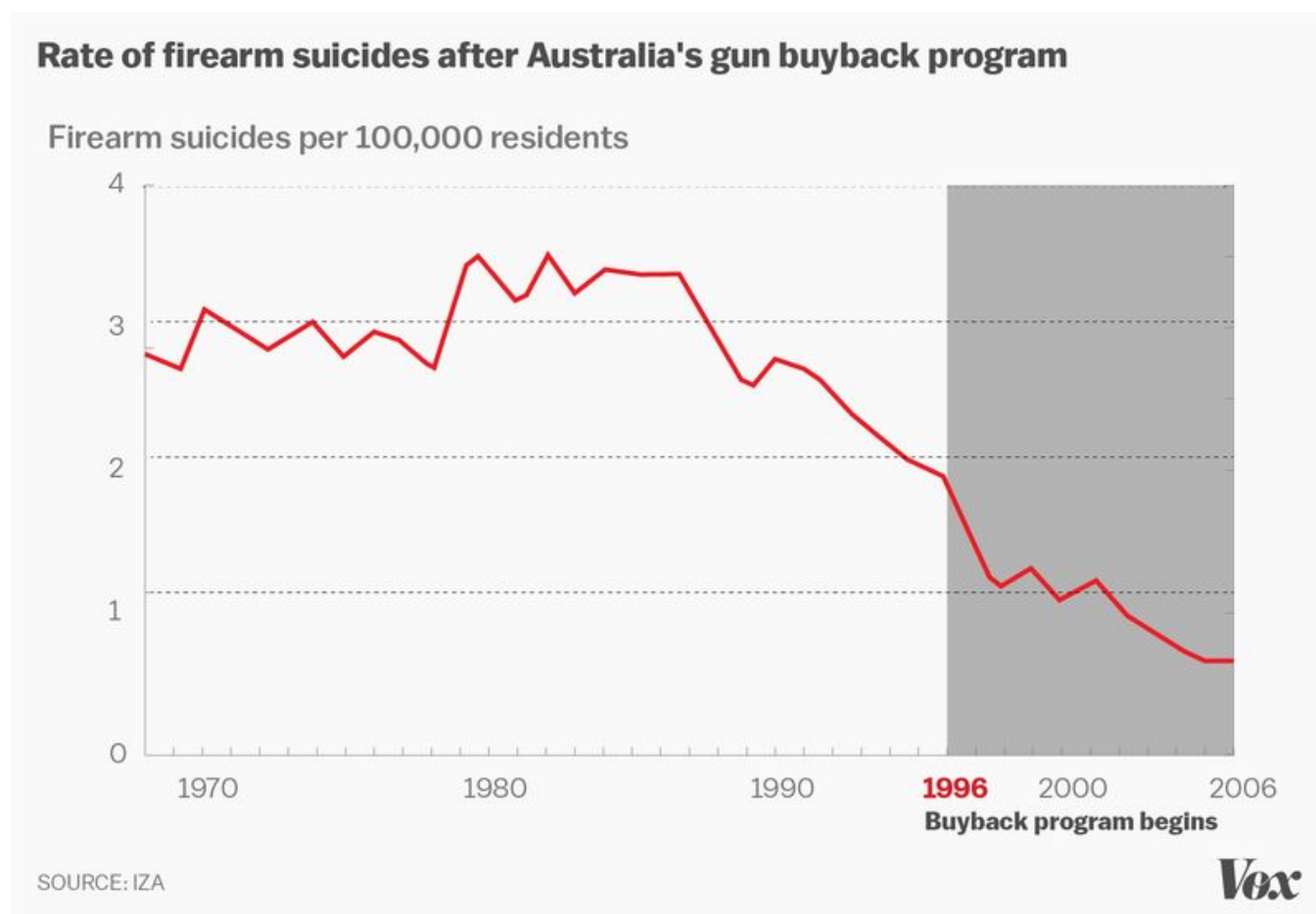
"Australia's firearm homicide rate dropped by about 42 percent in the seven years after the gun control law"

passed"

The result: Australia's firearm homicide rate dropped by about 42 percent in the seven years after the law passed, and its firearm suicide rate fell by 57 percent, according to [one review of the evidence](#) by Harvard researchers.

Now, it's difficult to know for sure how much of the drop in homicides and suicides was caused specifically by the gun buyback program. Australia's gun deaths, for one, were already declining before the law passed. But Harvard's [David Hemenway and Mary Vriniotis](#) argue that the gun buyback program very likely played a role: "First, the drop in firearm deaths was largest among the type of firearms most affected by the buyback. Second, firearm deaths in states with higher buyback rates per capita fell proportionately more than in states with lower buyback rates."

One [study](#) of the program, by Australian researchers, found that buying back 3,500 guns per 100,000 people correlated with up to a 50 percent drop in firearm homicides, and a 74 percent drop in gun suicides. As Vox's Dylan Matthews [noted](#), the drop in homicides wasn't statistically significant. But the drop in suicides most definitely was — and the results are striking.



Javier Zarracina/Vox

One other fact, noted by [Hemenway and Vrinotis](#) in 2011: "While 13 gun massacres (the killing of 4 or more people at one time) occurred in Australia in the 18 years before the [Australia gun control law], resulting in more than one hundred deaths, in the 14 following years (and up to the present), there were no gun massacres."

6) Although they get a lot of focus, mass shootings are a small portion of all gun violence

Depending on which [definition of mass shooting](#) one uses, there are anywhere from a [dozen](#) to a [few hundred](#) mass shootings in the US each year. These events are, it goes without saying, devastating tragedies for the nation and, primarily, the victims and their families.

Yet other, less-covered kinds of gun violence kill far more Americans than even these mass shootings. Under the broadest definition of mass shooting, these incidents killed about 500 Americans in 2013. That's just a fraction of total gun homicides: more than 11,200 that year. And firearm suicides killed even more: nearly 21,200 Americans.

Preventing suicides isn't something we typically include in discussions of gun control, but other countries' experiences show it can save lives. In Israel, where military service is mandatory for much of the population, policymakers realized that an alarming number of soldiers killed themselves when they went home over the weekend. So Israeli officials, as part of their solution, decided to try forcing the soldiers to keep their guns at the base when they went home. It worked: A [study](#) from Israeli researchers found that suicides among Israeli soldiers dropped by 40 percent.

So while politicians often lean on mass shootings to call for gun control, the problem goes far beyond those incidents, though it's hard to fault them for trying. Mass shootings, after all, force Americans to confront the toll of our gun laws and gun culture.

But it seems that we as a nation just aren't willing to look, or else don't sufficiently mind what we see, when these events occur. Even the 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in Newtown, Connecticut — in which a gunman killed 20 young children, six school personnel, and himself — catalyzed no significant change at the federal level and most states. Since then, there have been, by some estimates, [986 mass shootings](#), and there is every reason to believe there will be more to come.