

Falsehoods and Misconceptions

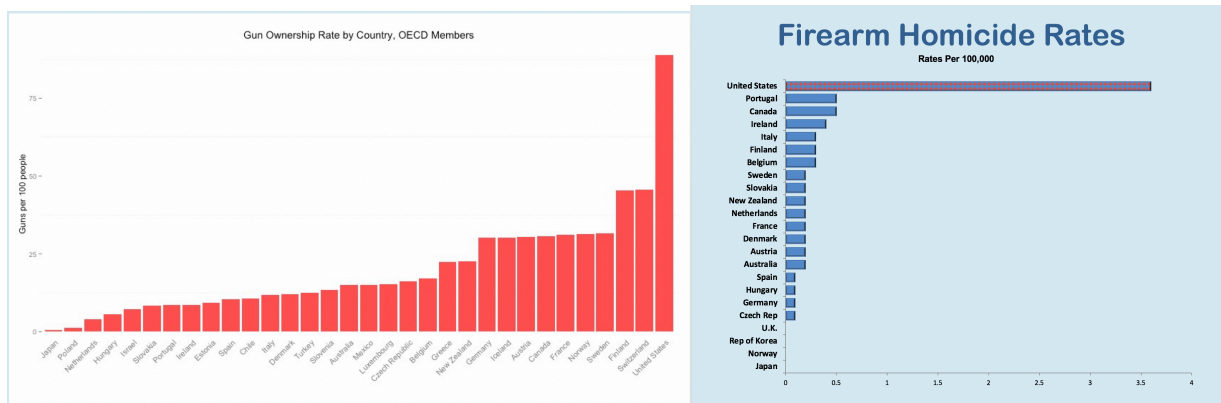
Common sense gun regulation is supported by the vast majority of people, both gun owners and those who don't own guns. Yet we seem unable to move forward with common sense changes to our gun regulation and ownership laws. Key to this failure has been a dense fog of falsehood and misconception, shrouding debate and thwarting any potential progress.

In America, there are now more guns in circulation than there are citizens. No credible regulatory scheme, no matter how smart or ambitious, is likely to bring the rate of gun deaths in America in line with other advanced countries of the world anytime soon. Whatever we achieve politically in the near term can only be considered a down-payment on a better world for our children.

What follows are the main falsehoods and misconceptions that stand in the way of addressing the epidemic of gun violence in the United States in a meaningful way.

Falsehood #1: The solution to gun violence is more gun ownership

The first obvious fact worth looking at is the number of guns¹ and firearm homicides² in the US compared to other economically advanced countries around the world.



It is almost ludicrous to expect that more guns will reduce firearm deaths. If it would, the US should have the lowest firearm death rate.

To prove their point, however, gun advocates sometimes point out that a massive rise in gun sales³ in recent decades has coincided with a long decline in crime rates. However, without some explanation of cause, this coincidence is misleading.

Crime rates have been falling in recent decades throughout the civilized world, in Britain, Germany, France and other countries⁴. Those declines have nothing to do with the increase in US gun sales. Instead, declining crime rates in the US are best attributed to more police, better policing, less drunkenness, and a better economy⁵.

Although gun sales in the U.S. have surged in recent years, gun ownership is actually declining. Fewer American households own a gun than at any point in the past half century. Only three percent of gun owners possess about half of all the weapons in circulation in the US; three quarters of Americans do not own a weapon⁶. Mass gun ownership has no relationship to declining crime rates.

Numerous studies have concluded that the mere presence of a gun can encourage aggressive behavior.

- Studies published in the American Journal of Medicine have shown that individuals are more likely to have lethal intent if they anticipate that their adversaries will be armed. They also concluded that greater gun availability leads to an increase in homicides⁷.
- Numerous other published studies conducted both in and out of the lab have shown that the mere sight of weapons increases aggression in both angry and non-angry individuals⁸.

Falsehood #2: Owning a gun makes you safer

The NRA often argues that the United States is a dangerous place and that owning and carrying a gun is the only way to protect both oneself and one's family.

While gun ownership is certainly one option for home defense, a growing body of data and research shows that owning a gun also increases the risk of a gun-related tragedy occurring in the home.

- Numerous studies have found that gun ownership increases the risk of both gun- related homicides and suicides.⁹
 - People who live in homes with firearms are 2 to 10 times more likely to die by homicide or suicide
 - It is 22 times more likely that a gun in the home will be used in a fatal or nonfatal unintentional shooting (4x), assault or homicide (7x) or suicide (11x) than in a self-defense shooting
- Guns in the home are particularly dangerous for victims of domestic violence. The presence of a gun in a home with a history of domestic violence increases the risk that a woman will be killed by 500 percent.¹⁰
- Guns intended for self-defense are commonly involved in fatal accidents. Studies have shown that across states, higher levels of gun ownership are linked to higher rates of unintentional firearm deaths.¹¹
- Guns are used far more often in criminal homicides than in justifiable acts of self-defense. In 2014, for every self-defense gun homicide in the United States, guns were used in 34 criminal homicides.¹²

Falsehood #3: Armed citizens are helpful in an active shooting situation

There is very little evidence suggesting that civilians can effectively stop an active shooter. Armed citizens often lack training for high-stakes situations and can actually make a bad situation worse.

An FBI study of 160 active-shooting incidents from 2000 to 2013 found that only one was stopped by an individual with a valid firearms permit. In contrast, 21 incidents were stopped by unarmed citizens.¹³

- Armed citizens can worsen the outcome of a mass shooting. During the 2011 shooting in Tucson, Arizona, an armed bystander misidentified the perpetrator and almost shot the wrong person.¹⁴
- Expansive concealed carry permitting laws are linked to an increase in violent crime. A 2017 study by researchers at Stanford University found that, 10 years after enacting these laws, states experienced a 13 percent to 15 percent rise in violent crimes.¹⁵
- Using a gun for defense during a robbery has no significant benefits. A 2015 analysis by researchers at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health of the National Crime Victimization Survey found that the likelihood of sustaining an injury during a robbery was nearly identical between people who attempted to defend themselves with a gun and those who took no defensive action.¹⁶
- A gun is more likely to be stolen than used to stop a crime. According to a CAP analysis of the National Crime Victimization Survey, guns are nearly twice as likely to be stolen as they are to be used for self-defense.¹⁷

Falsehood #4: Gun violence is declining so no action is needed

Despite a lower crime rate, **guns are** now competing with automobile accidents as one of the leading causes of premature death in the US¹⁸.

The lower rates of gun violence are nothing to brag about especially when compared to rates in other countries². When accidents and suicides are included in the statistics, gun deaths have been consistently rising while most other causes of death declined.¹⁹

Falsehood #5: Gun violence is mostly the result of mental illness

Although a bigger risk factor for suicide, serious mental illness, on its own, contributes very little to overall violence towards others. In fact, 96% of violence toward others occurs due to reasons other than serious mental illness alone.²⁰

Epidemiologic studies show that the large majority of people with serious mental illnesses are never violent. However, mental illness is strongly associated with increased risk of suicide, which accounts for over half of US firearms-related fatalities.

Risk factors more predictive of violence in youth are a past history of violence, poor family life, association with delinquent peers, and diminished economic opportunities.²¹

Falsehood #6: Gun violence can be caused by violent video games

There is no clear evidence to support claims that video games cause societal aggression or violence.

At any school in America, you would find that about 70 percent of the male students habitually play violent video games. Those who perpetrate acts of violence in schools are more than three times less likely to play violent video games than an average high school student²².

Falsehood #7: Gun violence is the result of decaying moral values

In general, we are living through an era of declining crime. Gun deaths stand out now against a backdrop of relative public calm.

The most lethal era to be a police officer in the US was the first third of the 20th century²³. Thousands of black Americans were killed in mass-violence in the same era. In prior centuries consider the slaughter of Native Americans.

School shootings are as old as school²⁴. The only difference between then and now is not decaying moral values, is the cheap and easy access to incredibly lethal guns.

Falsehood #8: The Second Amendment blocks gun regulation

When the framers wrote the second amendment and talked about “arms,” they were thinking about muskets and single-shot pistols. They could not have foreseen modern rifles or high-capacity magazines. They lived at a time when it was impossible to imagine one man barging into a crowded room and killing more than one or two people before having to reload and surely being subdued. Today it is not only imaginable but also tragically commonplace.

In 2008, the Supreme Court’s latest interpretation ruled that the second amendment guarantees the individual right of law-abiding, responsible citizens to possess and carry weapons for self-defense. The home is where the need for defense of self, family, and property is most acute. Later rulings extended the right to defend yourself outside of the home. The court also made it clear, however, that this does not preclude reasonable gun control measures. Not all weapons must be considered suitable for private hands.²⁵

Laws forbidding firearms in places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms, are not in violation of the second amendment. These are laws of our own choosing and created at the state level.

The banning of assault weapons by states is constitutional and has been upheld 4 times in the federal appellate courts²⁶.

“If you take away our guns only criminals will have them”

The familiar phrase *“If you take away our guns only criminals will have them”* is often used in “defense” of the Second Amendment. It perpetuates the falsehood that those who want to reduce gun violence by enacting common sense gun regulations are actually out to round up all firearms and have them destroyed. This claim is now baseless since the 2008 Supreme Court Ruling which affirmed everyone’s right to defend themselves.

Falsehood #9: There are enough gun laws already, we only need to enforce them

Calls for more determined enforcement of existing gun laws is a meaningless gesture since many of our gun laws have been carefully crafted to be unenforceable.

One law stands out as the most critical obstacle to enforcement of gun restrictions. A minor provision of the 1986 Firearm Owners Protection Act²⁷ bans states or federal agencies from building gun registries. Six states already possessed some form of registry and were exempted, but further efforts to break the enforcement of gun regulations made it difficult for them to leverage that information in any useful way.

Congress has protected gun companies from lawsuits²⁸. Threats from the NRA have blocked the Centers for Disease Control²⁹ from researching gun deaths. State and federal laws block law enforcement officials³⁰ from effectively tracking weapons used in crimes.

Chicago’s frustrating efforts to crack down on gun traffickers illustrates the problems with existing gun laws. Absence of tracking makes enforcement nearly impossible. This blind spot fosters a rich climate for illegal gun traffickers in Indiana. Even when federal officials catch someone funneling weapons illegally into Chicago, obtaining convictions is difficult³¹. Because of this, police invest little in enforcement efforts because prosecutors regularly decline cases. Prosecutors decline these cases because convictions are so rare³². Without federal help, local law enforcement in Chicago has almost no means to stop the flow of guns. Without smart laws, even federal assistance has limited value.

Falsehood #10: Gun legislation cannot stop gun violence

The reasons for the claim that gun legislation does not work takes many forms, all of them designed to make you feel nothing can be done.

Criminals do not follow laws

The fact that some individuals will undoubtedly violate any given law is not a reason to eliminate such laws altogether. Strong gun laws—such as those requiring background checks for all gun sales; prohibiting certain dangerous people from buying or possessing guns; and limiting access to highly dangerous weapons of war—are effective at helping keep guns out of the wrong hands in order to prevent gun violence and save lives.

- A 2016 CAP study found that the 10 states with the weakest gun laws have an aggregate level of gun violence that is more than three times higher than the 10 states with the strongest gun laws.³³
- Two studies by the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health demonstrated the impact of permit-to-purchase laws that include a background check requirement. When Connecticut implemented this law, gun homicides in the state fell 40 percent³⁴. When Missouri repealed a similar law, gun homicides in that state rose 25 percent.³⁵

There are too many guns out there to do anything about

A ban of illegal and unnecessary firearm ownership is not impossible to undertake. Other countries have done it successfully and there is no reason it cannot be done here in a manner compliant with the Second Amendment.

For those guns that remain legal, we need to improve our background check system by eliminating all loopholes, restoring the waiting period, and requiring registration and insurance.

Faced with registration and insurance costs, declines in casual gun ownership would accelerate. It would become very expensive to maintain a gun arsenal of dozens of weapons. Insurance costs would power the spread of trigger locks, gun safes and other safety protections. Registries would empower police to enforce gun laws.

Strict gun legislation has been proven ineffective in Chicago

Chicago has more gun murders than other large cities like New York and Los Angeles, thanks mostly to its long, unsecured border with Indiana. However, Chicago's murder rate still lags far behind the nation's leaders³⁶, many of which are in states with loose gun restrictions.

The highest rate of gun violence in America is Louisiana. New Orleans suffers from four times the rate of gun murders as Chicago. Such terrifying urban hellscapes as Kansas City, Memphis and Atlanta all rack up much higher rates of gun violence than Chicago. Expand the inquiry beyond crime, to include accidental gun deaths and suicide, and Chicago simply recedes from the frame. The obvious conclusion also happens to be an empirical fact: states with high levels of gun ownership have higher levels of gun death.

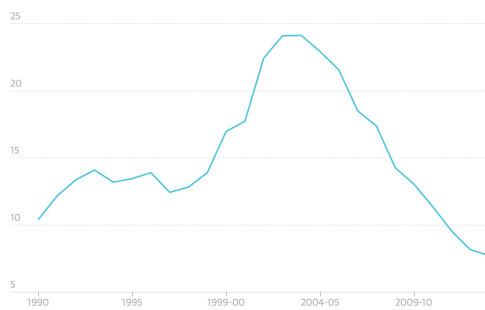
So why does Chicago even show up on the list? A Chicagoan can walk across a street into Indiana and purchase firearms from an unlicensed seller with no tracking of that transaction. That person can then walk back across the street into Chicago and commit a crime. This is a common practice. Most of the guns used in a crime in Chicago are originally purchased in Indiana or Mississippi³⁷. And of course, Indiana's rate of gun deaths is roughly a third higher than in Illinois³⁸.

If you take away guns, criminals will only find another way to kill you

The falsehood presented here makes it seem you are going to die anyway, so why bother. However, other countries such as the UK and Australia, which have restricted the availability of guns in combination with strict firearm licensing and registration, have greatly reduced gun violence³⁹.

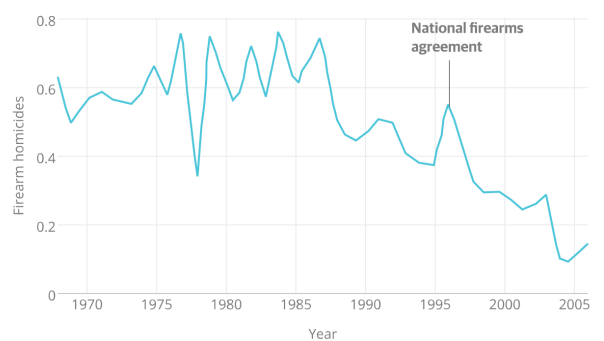
Gun crime in England and Wales

Police-recorded offences in which firearms were reported to have been used, in thousands



Guardian graphic | Source: Home Office/ONS. Note: The ONS cautions that the implementation of the National Crime Recording Standard in April 2002 means data from before this date may not be directly comparable with later figures

Firearm homicides per 100,000 people in Australia



Guardian graphic

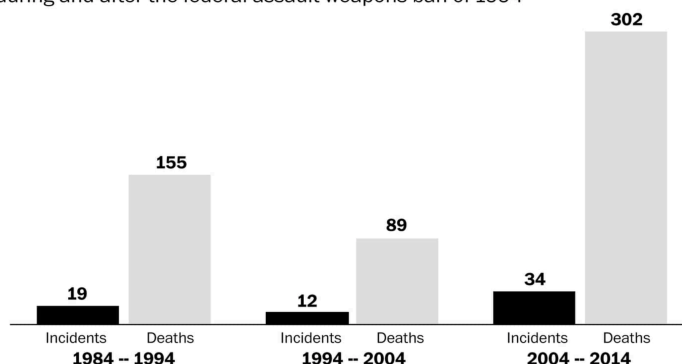
Source: ABS, Leigh & Neill 2010

Similarly, having fewer assault style weapons will reduce the carnage of mass shooting in both number of incidents and deaths per incident.

Passing the Federal Assault Weapons ban reduced the number of massacres from the previous 10 years. After the expiration ban in 2004, however, there was a dramatic increase⁴⁰.

Gun massacres fell during the assault weapons ban

Gun massacre (6+ deaths) incidents and fatalities in the decades before, during and after the federal assault weapons ban of 1994



Source: Louis Klarevas
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