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Facts and Frequently Asked Questions About Gun and Gun Violence

How do rates of firearm related deaths and injuries in the United States compare with rates in other high income democratic countries; and what are the reasons for any difference?

Rates of firearm related deaths and injuries are far higher in the United States than in all other high income democratic countries. The main reason for this difference is that gun control laws are far less stringent in the United States, and as a result, guns are far more available.

The most recent data show that the overall rate of people being killed by guns in the United States is 10 times higher than the average rate in the other 22 economically advanced democratic countries of the world. The U.S. gun related suicide rate is 8 times higher, and the U.S. gun related homicide rate is 25 times higher.¹ For U.S. children and youth, the difference is even more dramatic. Overall, the U.S. rate of gun related deaths for children and youth under the age of 19 is 37.5 times higher than the rate in other high income democratic countries.² For high school age youth, the U.S. rate is 82 times higher.³

After high profile shootings in the United States, most attention is usually focused on factors such as mental illness and substance abuse; a lack of appropriate social values; “guns in the wrong hands;” and a general culture of violence in the United States as possible reasons for the shootings. While such factors certainly contribute to gun violence, they don’t explain why rates of gun violence in the United States are extraordinarily high as compared with the rates in all other high income democratic countries.

The lifetime prevalence of mental illness and/or substance abuse in the United States is about 10% higher than in most other economically advanced democratic countries, although the observed difference may be due more to a higher rate of self-reporting in the United States than to real differences in the prevalence of these disorders.⁴ It’s estimated that overt mental illness accounts for only about 3-5% of all U.S. gun related deaths.⁵ Most people who are mentally ill don’t shoot anyone, and most people who do shoot themselves or someone else don’t have mental illness of the type that would prevent them from legally purchasing a gun under current U.S.

gun control laws, even if those laws were extended to cover every gun purchase and were enforced 100% of the time.

Rates of gun homicide in the United States are significantly higher in poorer neighborhoods than in more affluent ones, but the degree of socio-economic inequality in the United States, as measured by the Gini coefficient, is lower than in other high income democratic countries that have vastly lower rates of gun violence. For example, the Gini coefficient for the United States is lower than in Britain (0.499 in the U.S. versus 0.523 in Britain, with higher coefficients indicating greater inequality).⁶ The rate of gun deaths in the United States, though, is almost 150 times higher than in Britain.⁷

It cannot be denied that a culture of violence exists in the United States. The glorification of violence in the popular media is particularly problematic.⁸ A 1993 report estimated that by the time the average U.S. child had reached the age of 18, he or she had seen 200,000 acts of violence, including 16,000 simulated homicides, on television alone.⁹ The number of violent acts that today's children and youth witness on the many media formats to which they have access is probably much higher. If a culture of violence were the main cause of the extraordinarily high rate of gun violence in the United States, though, one would expect that the rates of other forms of violence would also be much higher in our country, but that is not the case. Including both fatal and non-fatal assaults, the rate of violent assault by any means in the United States is below the average for the other high income democratic countries of the world.¹⁰ The homicide rate in the United States, though, is 7 times higher than the average for the other countries.¹¹ The reason for the much higher U.S. homicide rate, despite a lower than average rate of violent assaults by any means, is that assaults in the United States are much more likely to be committed with a gun,¹² and guns are much more lethal in an assault than other commonly used weapons.¹³

Factors that contribute to gun violence, including mental illness and substance abuse, socio-economic inequality, and the glorification of violence in the popular media, certainly need to be addressed, but they're not the main reasons for the extraordinarily high rate of gun violence in our country as compared with all other high income democratic countries. The factors that most clearly distinguish the United States from all other economically advanced democratic countries that have far lower rates of gun related deaths, as well as far lower overall rates of homicide, and in most cases, suicide by any means, are the extraordinarily weak U.S. gun control laws as compared with the laws in other high income democratic countries and the related extraordinarily high number of guns in circulation.¹⁴

In all economically advanced democracies except the United States, the

guiding policy with regard to gun ownership is “restrictive.”¹⁵ A person seeking to acquire a gun must show convincing evidence that he or she needs a gun and can handle one safely before he or she can legally obtain a firearm. Recognizing that there is no net protective value from owning or carrying a gun, most other high income democratic countries don’t consider “self defense” to be a legitimate reason for owning a gun. In contrast, in the United States, the guiding policy is “permissive.” Anyone seeking to acquire a gun may legally obtain one unless government agencies can prove that he or she meets narrowly prescribed criteria for being prohibited from possessing a firearm.

All other high income democratic countries require all privately owned firearms to be registered and all gun owners to be licensed. In contrast, there is no federal requirement for gun registration and licensing in the United States, and only a handful of states require guns to be registered or gun owners to be licensed.¹⁶

In all other high income democratic countries, civilian ownership of handguns and automatic and semi-automatic rifles is either stringently regulated or completely prohibited.¹⁷ In the United States, federal law strictly regulates civilian ownership of fully automatic firearms (commonly referred to as “machine guns”), but anyone age 21 or older who can pass a rudimentary background check can legally buy a handgun from a federally licensed firearm dealer, and anyone who can pass a background check and is age 18 or older can buy a semi-automatic rifle, including the military style rifles commonly referred to as “assault weapons.”¹⁸ Anyone age 18 or over can buy a handgun legally without a background check from a private seller, and there is no age limit to buy a semi-automatic rifle without a background check from a private seller.

In many cases, state and local regulations on firearm ownership are more stringent than U.S. federal regulations.¹⁹ The Supreme Court struck down Washington DC’s partial ban on handgun ownership, though, in a narrow 5-4 ruling in the 2008 *Heller* decision,²⁰ and the same five justices struck down Chicago’s partial handgun ban in the related 2010 *McDonald* decision,²¹ citing *Heller* as the precedent. Since the *Heller* decision, more than 1,000 lawsuits have been filed by the gun lobby seeking to further weaken state and local firearm regulations.

It is the position of Americans Against Gun Violence that we have not only the ability, but also the moral responsibility, to reduce rates of gun violence in the United States to levels at or below the rates in the other high income democratic countries of the world, and that in order to do so, we must adopt comparably stringent gun control laws. There was no Second Amendment obstacle to adopting such laws prior to the rogue 2008 *Heller* decision. It is our position that *Heller* was wrongly decided and should be overturned.

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