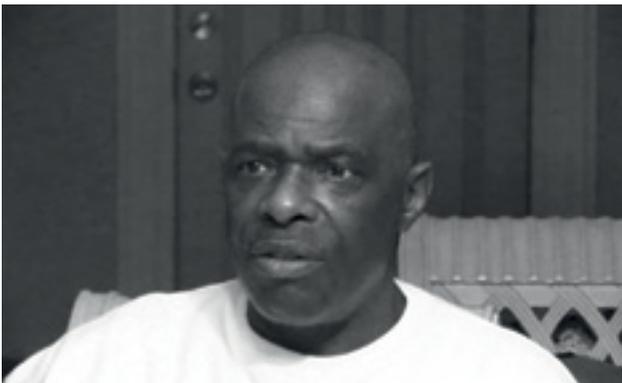


GUNS

12 CHAPTER

ON AVERAGE, 33,800 PEOPLE DIE – 11,564 IN HOMICIDES AND 21,037 BY SUICIDE – IN THE UNITED STATES FROM GUN VIOLENCE EVERY YEAR. MORE THAN TWICE AS MANY ARE ESTIMATED TO BE INJURED BY FIREARMS ANNUALLY. GIVEN THE PREVALENCE OF GUN VIOLENCE, IT CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR THOSE IN COUNTRIES WITH MORE RESTRICTIVE GUN LAWS TO UNDERSTAND WHY AMERICANS ARE SO PROTECTIVE OF THEIR RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS.

As he drives by a cemetery in North Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Mike Green stops talking to blow a kiss out the window of his minivan. It's his ritual to honor the daughter he lost nearly a decade ago. "In 2008 my daughter was murdered in this city. By whom? A guy that's been arrested several times," he says. Despite the perpetrator's criminal record, Green says, "He was smart enough to carry a gun. Kill two people. ... He had mental issues. But you can do that in America."



 Mike Green, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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————— Mike Green

Green is not alone in his heartbreak. On average, 33,800 people die – 11,564 in homicides and 21,037 by suicide – in the United States from gun violence every year.¹ More than twice as many are estimated to be injured by firearms annually.² Given the prevalence of gun violence, it can be difficult for those in countries with more restrictive gun laws to understand why Americans are so protective of their right to bear arms.

Gun ownership is relatively widespread in the United States. Approximately 31 percent of American households have guns, down from 50 percent in 1977,³ but the number of firearms produced in the United States continues to increase. There are now 270 million to 310 million guns in this country of 321 million people.⁴

THE LAW

The Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects "the right of the people to keep and bear arms."⁵ Looking all the way back to the Continental Army's fight against the British in the Revolutionary War, many Americans believe the right to own a weapon is critical to the United States' security and liberty.

"I think once we lose [the Second Amendment], we lose this country in many ways. Tyrants around the world, the first thing they do is disarm their own people," says Lou Jasikoff, a Libertarian radio personality and newspaper publisher in Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania, the state in which the Constitution was written and signed.



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———— Lou Jasikoff

Although the Constitution ensures the right to bear arms, states are tasked with establishing their own gun laws. Texas, for example, allows gun owners to carry their weapons in public places, unless otherwise marked, or to keep a firearm in the glove compartment of their car. Other states and cities, including Washington, D.C., have far stricter gun control laws, although it is difficult for law enforcement agencies to control the flow of weapons across state lines.

A major force shaping legislation on the state and national levels is the National Rifle Association. With an annual operating budget of approximately \$250 million⁶ and a highly mobilized membership, the NRA has an outsized voice in state and national debates on gun regulation, especially as there is no equivalent force on the other side of the issue.

Most Americans support some gun control. A 2016 Gallup poll found that 62 percent of Americans were dissatisfied with current gun laws, with 38 percent in favor of tighter laws versus 15 percent who wanted to loosen restrictions.⁷



 Wade Brody, El Paso, Texas

FACTS AND FIGURES

- » 31 percent of American households have a gun
- » 38 percent of Americans want tighter gun laws
- » 15 percent want looser gun laws
- » 33,800 people die each year in the U.S. from guns

Gun owners like Wade Brody, a veteran studying for a career in renewable energy in El Paso, Texas, say they do not object to gun laws per se. In fact, citing accidental shootings where guns were carelessly left accessible to children, he advocates laws requiring gun owners to keep the weapons locked up. But he and others worry about how far the regulations might go. “But, you know, regulation to the point where you ... tell me how many guns I can have [is a problem]. The problem with [regulation] would be, they’d have to come into your home and inspect, so that’s kind of an intrusion.”

Greg Guibert, a civil servant with the city of Boulder, Colorado, is less concerned about the erosion of rights than about the country's impasse on sensible gun laws.

"I think we have just really kind of lost our way at having a rational conversation about the role that firearms can play in our community and I could even see my way through to some measure of compromise on it," he says. "I'm not so strident that no one should have a gun. ... It's just amazing to me where we've landed on this."

In Philadelphia, Mike Green also struggles to understand why firearms are not better regulated, especially the sale of rapid-fire, high capacity weapons and unfettered "gun show" sales.

"These assault weapons are not necessary," he says. "The regulations are where you can go to a gun show and purchase a gun. ... It needs to be closely monitored more efficiently so that these types of people don't get their hands on guns. ... To me it has nothing to do with equal rights or 'It's my constitutional right to bear arms.' It has nothing to do with that."

GEOGRAPHY

Many Second Amendment advocates are frustrated by national or state policies that they say are not relevant in their own town or region. Joe Wardy, a former mayor of El Paso, Texas, and chief executive of a local startup incubator, says, "I totally understand the problems that Baltimore and Philadelphia and Chicago have, but we don't have those problems here. So this one size fits all and this categorizing everybody in the same mold doesn't work, and that's what angers people."



 Joe Wardy, El Paso, Texas

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's latest statistics, El Paso, with a population of approximately

679,700, had 10 murders in 2015, compared with Baltimore, which had 233 murders for a population of 622,671.⁸

"You can't fix everything on a national level. I think we've reached the saturation point where we're finally realizing that doesn't work anymore. You've got to give the states much more latitude to do what works in their communities," Wardy says.

"I totally understand the problems that Baltimore and Philadelphia and Chicago have, but we don't have those problems here. So this one size fits all ... doesn't work."

————— Joe Wardy

In more rural areas, where the closest police officer might be 30 minutes away or more, many feel responsible for defending themselves, their family or community members from danger. These rural communities are often particularly defensive of their gun rights, because they believe that carrying a gun is critical to their safety.

FAMILY TRADITIONS

Many gun owners feel a deep connection with guns because of their upbringing and fond memories of hunting or skeet shooting with their families. Jane Walsh Waitkus, a Democratic county councilwoman from Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, sees hunting as a special bonding activity in her family. "Two of my grandchildren – my boys – go hunting with their dad and their uncles and their cousins. And they're great sportsmen. And I just think that's wonderful," she says. "I support gun rights."

Similarly, Margie Diaz, a potato farmer from Alamosa, Colorado, grew up with guns. "My brother taught me how to shoot," she recalls, reminiscing about target practice and her brother's and father's frequent hunting trips. "So it was a natural thing."

Her husband did not grow up with guns, so she does not have any in her house. "But my [adult] sons, they learned from their grandpa, and they have them." She says people should be taught "a healthy respect" for guns.

Since many Americans first experience guns with their families, some gun owners believe the family is responsible for teaching proper gun use.

NEIGHBORLY TRUST

Even though gun violence in the United States is often called an “epidemic,” most Americans have no personal experience with it. Perhaps for this reason, they assume their neighbors and community members behave responsibly with their firearms.

“I think enough gun owners – or legal gun owners – have enough sense,” El Paso resident Atim Smith says.



▲ Annie Beach, El Paso, Texas

But Annie Beach, a social worker in El Paso, supports gun control because she sees regular evidence that gun owners do not always exercise their common sense:

“As a social worker, I go into people’s homes and I have to look at where they’re storing their weapons – and people are woefully uneducated about proper weapon storage, which is scary. Especially when you have kids in the home. People are willing to leave out loaded weapons with no sort of guards whatsoever. ... There can be an accident.”

KEEPING THE COUNTRY SAFE

The past decades have seen dozens of school shootings and cases of toddlers accidentally killing family members – or themselves – as well as devastating gang violence in cities across the country. Perhaps most notorious were the 2012 shooting deaths of 20 elementary school students and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. The nation was outraged and Congress was poised to pass gun regulations, but backed off when a particularly conservative faction of the NRA protested.



▲ Atim Smith, El Paso, Texas

“I think enough gun owners – or legal gun owners – have enough sense.”

————— Atim Smith

Most Americans, including gun owners, would like their communities to be safe, but in such a vast country perspectives vary wildly about the dangers that guns pose – and the potential safety they provide families, schools and communities. With the debate over gun control falling largely along partisan lines, and vocal gun owners tilting conservative, meaningful legislation would have to come from Republicans. That is unlikely, however, given how entwined gun rights have become with the very idea of liberty – and how much power pressure groups such as the NRA have amassed.

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