

15. Gun Control

In the wake of many recent mass shootings, gun control has taken center stage in public debate in the United States. The shooting in Las Vegas in October of 2017 was the deadliest in American history, killing 58 people and injuring 851.¹ According to data from Gun Violence Archive—which defines a mass shooting as any incident in which at least four people are shot or killed (not counting the shooter)—as of the end of August, there have already been 237 mass shootings in 2018. In these incidents, 235 people have been killed and nearly 1,000 people have been injured.² Mass shootings, however, are a relatively small part of the full picture of gun violence and death in the U.S., which includes other homicides, accidents, and, most of all, suicide (which contributes to more than 20,000 gun deaths annually).³ Moreover, these numbers don't accurately reflect the broader psychological effects of widescale gun violence. But even in light of these tragedies, gun control remains controversial.

Those who advocate much stricter gun control point to the bad effects of the continued availability of so many guns in the U.S. A 2012 estimate from the Congressional Research Service put the number of guns in the U.S. at 310 million, more than the population of the country at the time.⁴ The rate of gun homicides in the U.S. (in 2010) was 25.2 times higher than the rate in a sample of 23 other OECD countries, all of which have much stricter gun laws than the U.S.⁵ Advocates claim that this data shows that the continued availability of so many guns is a threat to public safety and so a violation of our rights to personal security.⁶ The government is therefore morally required to put significant limits on the availability of guns in the U.S.

Opponents of gun control often appeal to the right to self-defense to argue for their position. On their view, if the government were to act to put significant limits on the availability of guns, they would be depriving private citizens of one of the most effective means of self-defense. Because the right to self-defense is so important, it would require an enormous gain in personal security in order to justify any government action limiting our ability to defend ourselves with guns. But, opponents argue, the statistics do not justify harsher gun control measures. In 2016, the gun death rate in the U.S. was 11.96 per 100,000 people or 0.01196%. Canada, by contrast, had a gun death rate (in 2011) of 2.05 per 100,000 people or 0.00205%. Even in countries with very strict gun laws, such as the U.K., the gun death rate (in 2013) was 0.22 per 100,000 or 0.00022%. Opponents argue that because the chance of being killed by a firearm is so low overall, the comparisons with other countries are not convincing enough to constrain the right to self-defense.

Beyond questions about the total number of guns in the U.S., there are also important debates about the types of firearms that people are allowed to possess. Proponents of stricter gun control measures point out, for instance, that assault weapons, high capacity magazines, and bump stocks, among other things, are not necessary for self-protection, and thus can be legitimately prohibited. In response to this argument, gun advocates point out that even if these weapons and accessories get a lot of public attention because of their use in some high-profile cases, they are used in only a small percentage of incidents of gun violence. As a result, prohibiting these weapons is not likely to make a meaningful dent in the overall number of gun deaths.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Does the right to self-defense justify gun ownership? Why or why not?
2. How should a society balance the individual rights of its members to protect themselves with its responsibility to promote public safety, more generally? When, if ever, is it justifiable to restrict an individual's right to self-defense?
3. To what extent does the rate of gun violence in the U.S. justify passing laws to restrict gun ownership?

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_Las_Vegas_shooting

² <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>

³ <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/mass-shootings-are-a-bad-way-to-understand-gun-violence/>

⁴ <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL32842.pdf>

⁵ [https://www.amjmed.com/article/S0002-9343\(15\)01030-X/fulltext](https://www.amjmed.com/article/S0002-9343(15)01030-X/fulltext)

⁶ <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/19/why-gun-control-is-not-enough/>