

The Gun DEBATE

Mass shootings have reignited the political fight over gun control. Here's what you need to know to understand the issue.

BY PATRICIA SMITH

Last month, following a spate of mass shootings in the U.S., a tearful President Obama announced that he was using his executive powers to try to stem gun violence. The modest steps he announced—the only ones he could take without the approval of Congress—included trying to expand the number of gun sellers required to conduct criminal background checks, pledging to hire more people to carry out those checks, and ordering better tracking of lost guns.

The president's move came a month after a terrorist shooting in December in San Bernardino, California, left 14 people dead. That and other recent shootings, including one in October at a community college in Oregon in which nine people died, have reignited the national debate over gun control.

The U.S. has more guns per capita than any other developed country—and far more gun violence (see chart, p. 11). In 2014, there were more than 33,000 firearm-related deaths in the U.S. The question is whether stricter gun control laws would help lower that number. Congress, like the nation, has long been divided and hasn't passed major gun control legislation in the past two decades.

Here's what you need to know to understand the ongoing debate.



President Obama teared up at the White House last month when he spoke about gun violence.

What is gun control?

"Gun control" is a broad term that covers many kinds of restrictions. It can include regulations on what kinds of firearms can be bought and sold, who can possess or sell them, and where and how they can be stored or carried. Gun control can involve the responsibilities a seller has to check a buyer's background and whether a gun sale should be reported to the government. The term also covers limits on types of ammunition and the size of magazines (the part of the gun that holds ammunition).

In recent years, gun control debates have focused on three issues: background checks for buyers, the laws regulating who can carry weapons in public, and the kinds of guns available for purchase. One of the most contentious arguments is over who should be

allowed to possess assault rifles—military-style weapons capable of firing multiple bullets quickly; assault rifles have been used in many recent mass shootings.

What's the state of federal gun control today?

Federal law prohibits specific groups of people from owning firearms. The list includes convicted felons, those diagnosed with certain types of mental illness, and immigrants without legal status.

The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, passed by Congress in 1993, requires licensed gun dealers to conduct background checks on potential buyers through an F.B.I. database. This is meant to prevent the sale of guns to someone who's prohibited from owning one.

But the system has major holes in it. Perhaps the biggest is that many small-scale gun sellers claim to be "hobbyists," who aren't required to conduct background checks. Because many of these sellers do business at gun shows, this is often referred to as "the gun show loophole." Another problem: Most people with serious mental illness never receive a diagnosis, so they can still own guns legally.

From 1994 to 2004, federal law banned the sale of many types of assault rifles and high-capacity magazines. Since the law expired, repeated efforts to renew the ban in Congress

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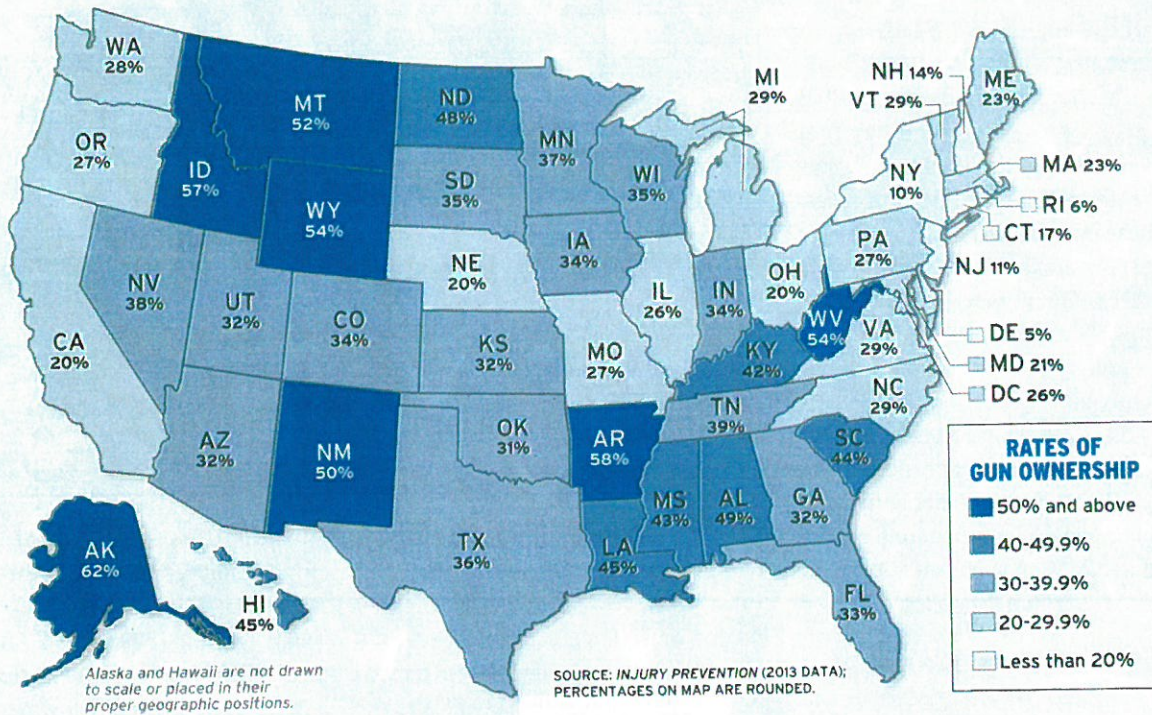
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Gun rights activists get lunch after a rally in Houston to support Texas's new open-carry law. The law took effect January 1.

GUN OWNERSHIP BY STATE

Overall, about 30 percent of Americans own guns, but the rates vary widely among states



like more-stringent background checks, which it once supported.

Over the past generation, American politics has become more partisan and regional divisions more rigid. Republicans have become more uniformly opposed to gun laws at a time when they control Congress and most state houses.

What have states done?

Most gun control exists at the state level. Some states have stricter background check systems than the federal one; some require a license or permit to own a gun, but most don't. California, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island have the most restrictive laws. But in other parts of the country there's much more resistance to gun laws. The result is that in recent years, states have gone in opposite directions.

After the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, which killed 20 children and 6 adults, New York and Connecticut

THE U.S. VS. OTHER COUNTRIES

Annual gun-related homicides per 100,000 people in selected countries

Honduras	68.43
Mexico	9.97
Philippines	8.93
United States	3.20
Egypt	.57
Canada	.51
Germany	.19
Australia	.14
England/Wales	.07
Japan	.01

SOURCE: THE WASHINGTON POST, 2012

passed new restrictions on assault rifles and large-capacity magazines. These laws were challenged by a group of gun owners, dealers, and activists, but a federal appeals court ruled in October that the measures don't violate the Second Amendment.

But other states have eased restrictions. In Texas, a new "open carry" law allows people to carry handguns openly in most public places. In Arkansas, voters can bring guns into polling places. In Kansas, gun owners no longer need a license to carry concealed weapons.

The wide variety of regulations in different states allows guns to flow freely across state lines. For example, New York has very strict gun laws, but more than two-thirds of guns used in crimes in New York City come from other states with weaker gun laws.

Only federal legislation could address that problem, and that looks increasingly unlikely.

"We are deeply polarized as a country," says Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia Center for Politics. "Gun control is now part of the cluster of social issues where compromise has become virtually impossible." •

With reporting by Richard Pérez-Peña of *The New York Times* and by Bryan Brown.