

Article Name: These 4 products say everything about America's gun problem

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Bullet-resistant shields for classrooms shouldn't be an easier sell than gun control.

By Alexia Fernández Campbell@AlexiaCampbellalexia@vox.com Jul 31, 2018, 8:40am EDT
RENO, Nevada—

Las Vegas. PepperBall. Vendors hawked their safety products to school cops at a casino resort in Nevada this month during the National School Safety Conference. The exhibit hall was packed, with dozens of businesses selling high-tech answers—and some low-tech options—to the question on many people's minds: How do we prepare for a mass shooting at our school? One seller insisted that the answer is a bullet-resistant blanket nailed to classroom doors. Another vendor said schools should arm teachers with flashlights that shoot pellets of pepper spray. A chatty ex-cop said his bullet-resistant backpacks will shield children from the bullets of an AR-15. Public schools across the country are under pressure to do something—anything—to make sure they don't end up in the news as the latest site of a mass shooting. The February mass shooting at a high school in Parkland, Texas, which killed 17 people, has reminded parents and school officials that it's no longer quite so rare for a teenager to gun down his classmates, and that it could happen at any school in America. Republican leaders have once again ignored the most obvious solution—stricter federal gun laws—just as they did after Columbine and Sandy Hook. Instead, Congress is giving millions of dollars to public schools to come up with any other solution, whether that means hiring more school cops, fortifying school buildings, hiring school psychologists, or organizing school shooting drills. The sudden influx of money is one reason the exhibit hall at the school safety conference was packed this year. A record number of businesses and nonprofits rented booths at the Peppercorn Hotel Resort and Casino, according to the National Association of School Resource Officers, which hosts the annual conference. Private security companies showcased many products you would expect to see at a school safety conference, such as security cameras and metal detectors. But a striking number of vendors were selling unconventional, even bizarre, solutions to protect school children from a shooter. Here's a sampling. Door Shield: the bullet-resistant classroom blanket "You want to see something cool?" asked Georg Olsen, of US Armor, from his booth in the conference exhibit hall. The California-based company is best known for making body armor for police officers, but that's not what Olsen wanted to show me. He gestured toward what looked like an oversized, canvas picnic blanket that was rolled up and bolted to a wooden panel. With one hard tug on a red strap, the blanket unfurled to the floor. But it wasn't a blanket at all. It's something called Door Shield, Olsen explained, and he had it made just in time for the school safety conference. It's essentially a panel of "soft armor"—used as cover by police SWAT teams when they raid buildings and exchange gunfire. Olsen nailed the shield to a wooden board, where it can be rolled up and mounted above a classroom door. If a shooter breaks into a school, teachers can lock the door, and with one hard tug on the canvas strap, the bullet-resistant panel rolls down and covers the door. "Even a child can operate this," Olsen said. He admitted that soft armor was designed to stop the bullet of a semi-automatic pistol, not an assault-style rifle like the one used in the Parkland shooting.

Even so, he said, a thick classroom door and the Door Shield together would definitely stop the bullet of a long rifle. I pointed out that the \$1,995 price tag would make it expensive for schools to

buy one for each classroom. Olsen wasn't fazed. "It's cost versus value," he said. "The cost of [Door Shield] versus the value of a life."

PepperBall Life Lite Launcher: the flashlight that shoots pepper bullets

The two sales guys at the PepperBall booth said they had a solution for schools that don't want teachers to carry guns: weapons that shoot pepper bullets. Their company specializes in ammunition designed to be non-lethal, like the PepperBall guns they normally sell to police officers. The guns shoot bullets filled with pepper spray, or pellets that can break glass in case of an emergency. For teachers who are intimidated by the pepper guns, the company has another product, Erik Leslie, VP of sales for the company, said. It's called the LifeLite PepperBall Launcher. Leslie showed the launcher to me, and it looked just like a heavy duty flashlight, which it is. But then he pushed a lever on the side, exposing a hidden red trigger (he prefers to call it a "button"). A laser beam shot out to mark the target. Then Leslie walked over to a makeshift target and pressed down on the trigger five times, which made a loud popping sound as each PepperBall bullet shot out. The bullets, about the size of a marble, were filled with talcum powder—just for training purposes. In real life, or in the event that a teacher comes face to face with a shooter, the bullets would be filled with Pava, a chemical compound that irritates the eyes and constricts the throat. "The bad guy will be too busy coughing to keep shooting," Leslie said. Then he let me try it: It took a few tries to figure out the right amount of pressure to activate the trigger, but it was otherwise easy to shoot. Teachers might want training before using the launcher, Leslie said. The PepperBall launcher, which sells for \$299, wasn't made with teachers in mind. The company originally marketed the product to truck drivers, campers, and other civilians who wanted to protect themselves without carrying a gun. But sales of the LifeLite weren't great, Leslie said. Then the Parkland shooting happened, and schools started talking about giving teachers guns to protect their students—a highly controversial idea. Leslie thought the flashlight launcher struck the right balance between giving teachers guns and giving them nothing.

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I went to a huge conference on school safety. No one wanted to talk about gun control. Obviously, the product is no match for a person with an AR-15 rifle. Leslie agreed. "This is not going to take down a bad guy, all it will do is buy a teacher some time until the cops can get there." The bullet-resistant backpack Ron Weaver is a former LAPD cop, and he was super excited about showing me his line of bullet-resistant backpacks and laptop bags. He swears none of the other bullet-resistant backpacks on the market are as lightweight as his, or shield a larger area of person's body from a spray of bullets. "Here's a backpack that will save your life," said Weaver, picking up one of the models he was showcasing at the conference. Weaver showed me the two slim polyurethane plates nestled in each bag. Then he pointed to the bumps on the plates from the AR-15 bullets he shot them up with. "It didn't go through," he said.

Weaver owns Eastern Beacon Industries, a company that makes tactical gear and accessories for civilians. He began in January selling his ballistic backpacks and laptop cases, which run from \$500 to \$800 each, to urban professionals who feared getting caught in the middle of a gunfight. After Parkland, however, Weaver said he began getting a lot more interest from parents. They wanted to know if he made backpacks for kids. Not yet. Weaver is designing a line of colorful backpacks for teens and kids, which he plans to have on the market in September. "I never intended to sell these to children," he said. Weaver gave me a quick demo to show how fast he could unzip the backpack to release the two plates of body armor: Laser Shot: the training "video game" for school cops

One booth in the exhibit hall was always crowded with school police officers and administrators. At first, it seemed like they were playing video games on a huge projector screen. They weren't. The

booth belonged to LaserShot, a company that makes virtual shooting simulations to train police officers. With a fake gun that resembles a Glock-17, police officers can practice target shooting to react to a variety of scenarios: a home hostage situation, a bank robbery, a mall shooting. More recently, Laser Shot added school shootings to the library, including one in which a teenage boy terrorizes a high school with a semi-automatic rifle. A salesperson for Laser Shot showed a school administrator how to hold the fake pistol to test out the school shooting scenario. She was curious if the program would help train school cops in her state of Alabama. Students appeared on screen and began screaming; some hid behind tables in what looked like a high school library. Then the shooter popped up from behind a table and pointed his gun at Marilyn Lewis, who was testing out the program. She shot him twice and missed. Then she shot him in the chest. He fell to the floor. Everyone at the booth applauded. Read Vox's coverage of the National School Safety conference to find out what schools are doing (and what lawmakers are not doing) about mass shootings at US schools.

In this storystream:

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- <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/2/21/17028930/gun-violence-mass-shootings-us-statistics-charts>
- <https://www.vox.com/2018/7/31/17514216/gun-violence-school-shootings-safety-products-gun-control>
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I've covered gun violence for years. The

solutions aren't a big mystery.

America can prevent shootings. But it has to come to grips with the problem.

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A year ago today, on February 14, 2018, a gunman walked into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, killed 17 people, and wounded 17 others. The shooting inspired a wave of activism, leading to the [March for Our Lives](#) in Washington, DC, and [new activism for gun control](#) around the 2018 midterm elections.

But since the Parkland shooting, Congress has taken no significant steps to address gun violence. And since Parkland, there have been [nearly 350 mass shootings](#) — nearly one every day — based on the [Gun Violence Archive's](#) definition, which counts every event in which four or more people, excluding the shooter, were shot but not necessarily killed at the same general time and location.

We know what to do to stop this. But we aren't doing it.

Since I began covering mass shootings at Vox, I've seen the same pattern play out again and again: A shooting happens. There are demands for action.

Maybe something gets introduced in Congress. The debate goes back and forth for a bit. Then people move on — usually after [a week or two](#) (although Parkland [was an exception](#)). Then, eventually, there's another mass shooting, and the cycle begins anew.

I have become eerily attuned to this [horrible American ritual](#). I even have my own version of it: Every time we get news of a mass shooting, I verify the reports, contribute to a “what we know” article, and then begin to update our old pieces on guns. Because nothing changes, everything we wrote in the past still applies; all we have to change is the date, location, and number of dead.

I do this almost instinctively at this point — and that terrifies me. No one should get used to this.

As I see it, the core issue is that America collectively refuses to even admit it has a serious problem with guns and gun violence. Lawmakers continue acting like the solutions are some sort of mystery, as if there aren't years of research and experiences in other countries that show restrictions on firearms can save lives.

Consider President Donald Trump's initial [speech](#) in response to the Parkland shooting: His only mention of guns was a vague reference to “gunfire” as he described what happened. He never even brought up gun control or anything related to that debate, instead vaguely promising to work “with state and local leaders to help secure our schools and tackle the difficult issue of mental health.”

This is America's elected leader — and he essentially, based on his first public response, ignored what the real problem is. And although the White House eventually [came around](#) to [bipartisan proposals](#) to very slightly improve background checks and [ban bump stocks](#), the compromises amount to fairly small changes to America's [weak gun laws](#).

In my coverage of these shootings, I've always focused on solutions through studies and policy ideas that would tamp down on the number of shootings. The good news is there are real solutions out there.

But America can't get to those solutions until it admits it has a gun problem and confronts the reality of what it would mean to seriously address it.

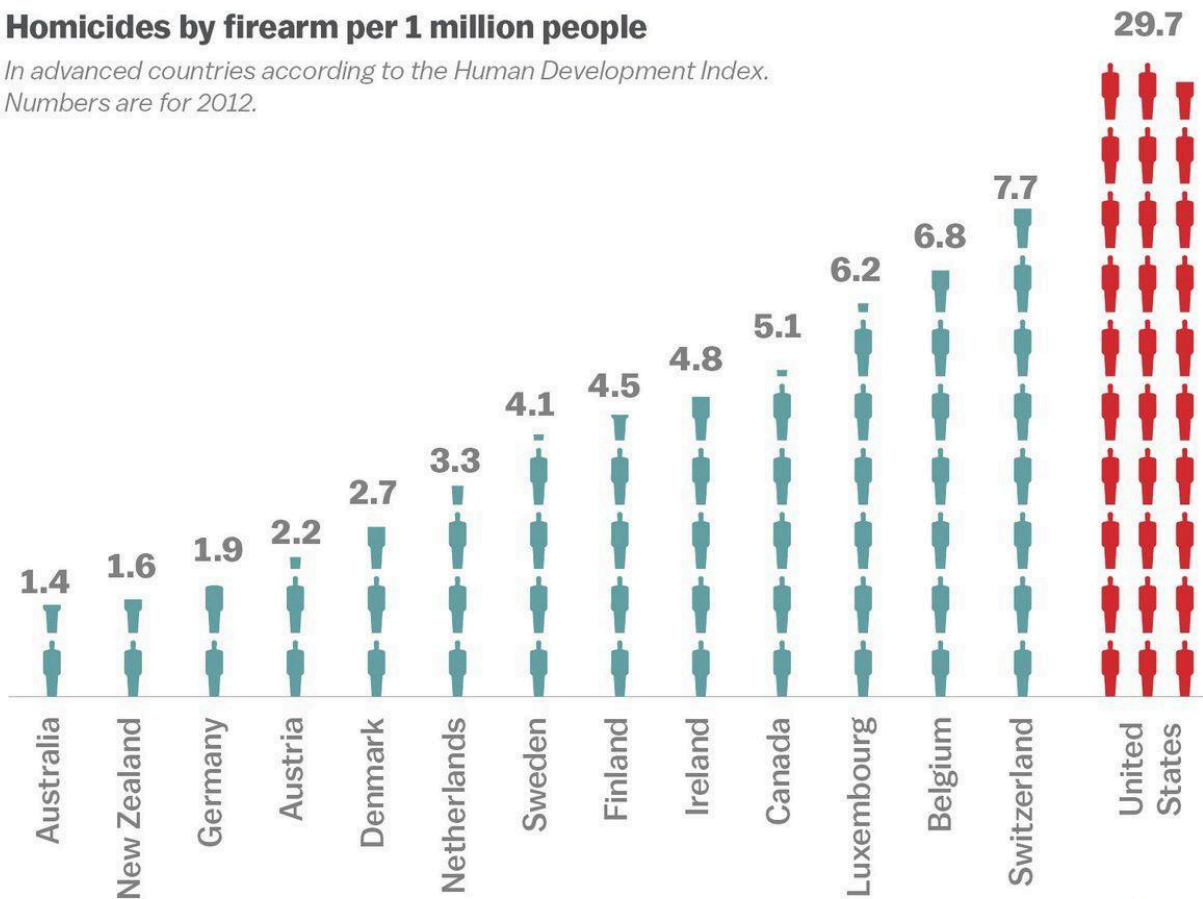
1) America has a unique gun violence problem

The US is unique in two key — and related — ways when it comes to guns: It has way more gun deaths than other developed nations, and it has far higher levels of gun ownership than any other country in the world.

The US has nearly six times the gun homicide rate of Canada, more than seven times that of Sweden, and nearly 16 times that of Germany, according to [United Nations data](#) compiled by the Guardian. (These gun deaths are a big reason America has a [much higher overall homicide rate](#), which includes non-gun deaths, than other developed nations.)

Homicides by firearm per 1 million people

*In advanced countries according to the Human Development Index.
Numbers are for 2012.*



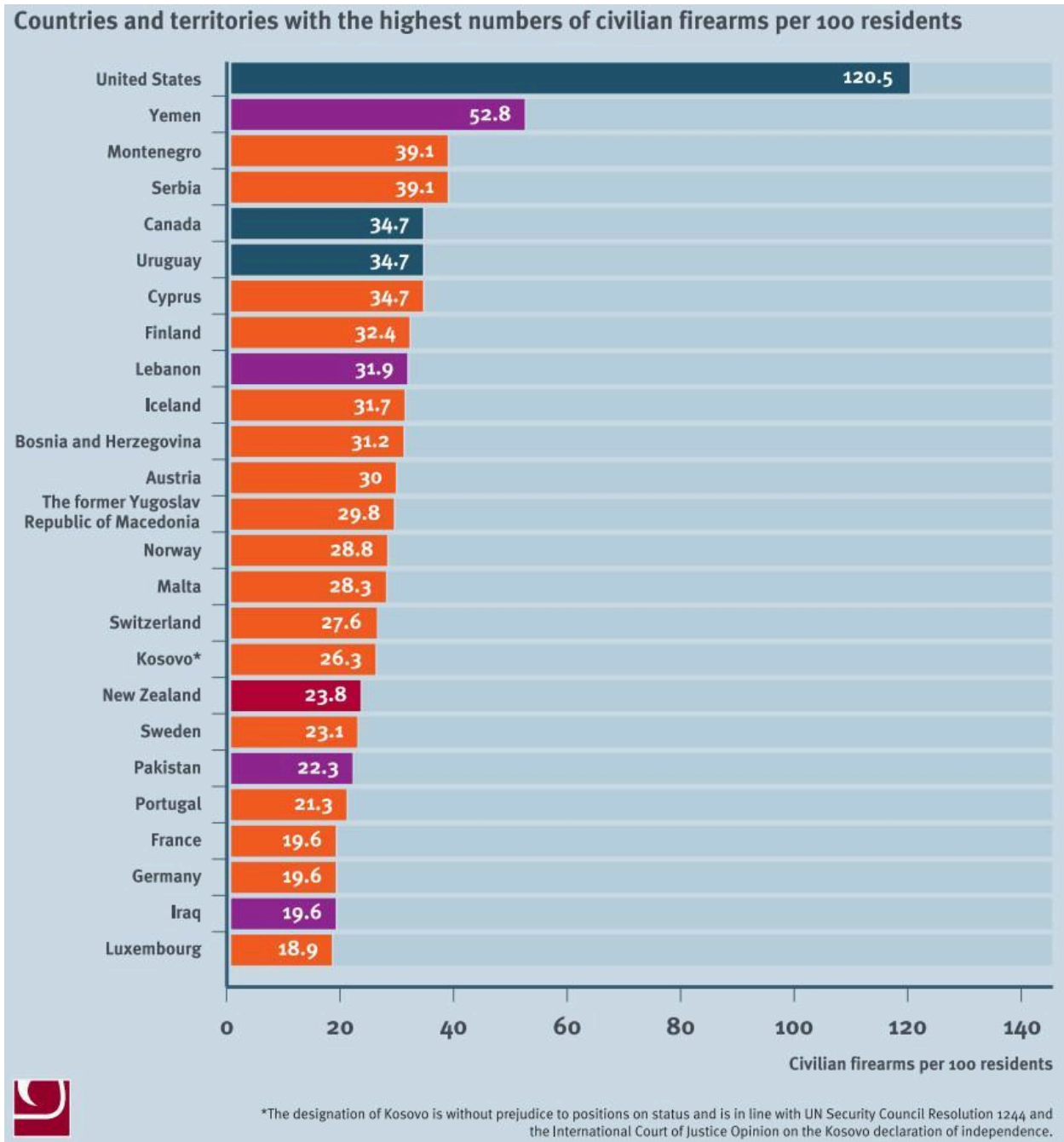
SOURCE: UNODC, Small Arms Survey, via The Guardian.

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Javier Zarracina/Vox

Mass shootings actually make up a small fraction of America's gun deaths, constituting [less than 2 percent](#) of such deaths in 2016. But America does see a lot of these horrific events: According to [CNN](#), "The US makes up less than 5% of the world's population, but holds 31% of global mass shooters."

The US also has by far the highest number of privately owned guns in the world. Estimated for 2017, the number of civilian-owned firearms in the US was 120.5 guns per 100 residents, meaning there were more firearms than people. The world's second-ranked country was Yemen, a quasi-failed state torn by civil war, where there were 52.8 guns per 100 residents, according to an [analysis from the Small Arms Survey](#).

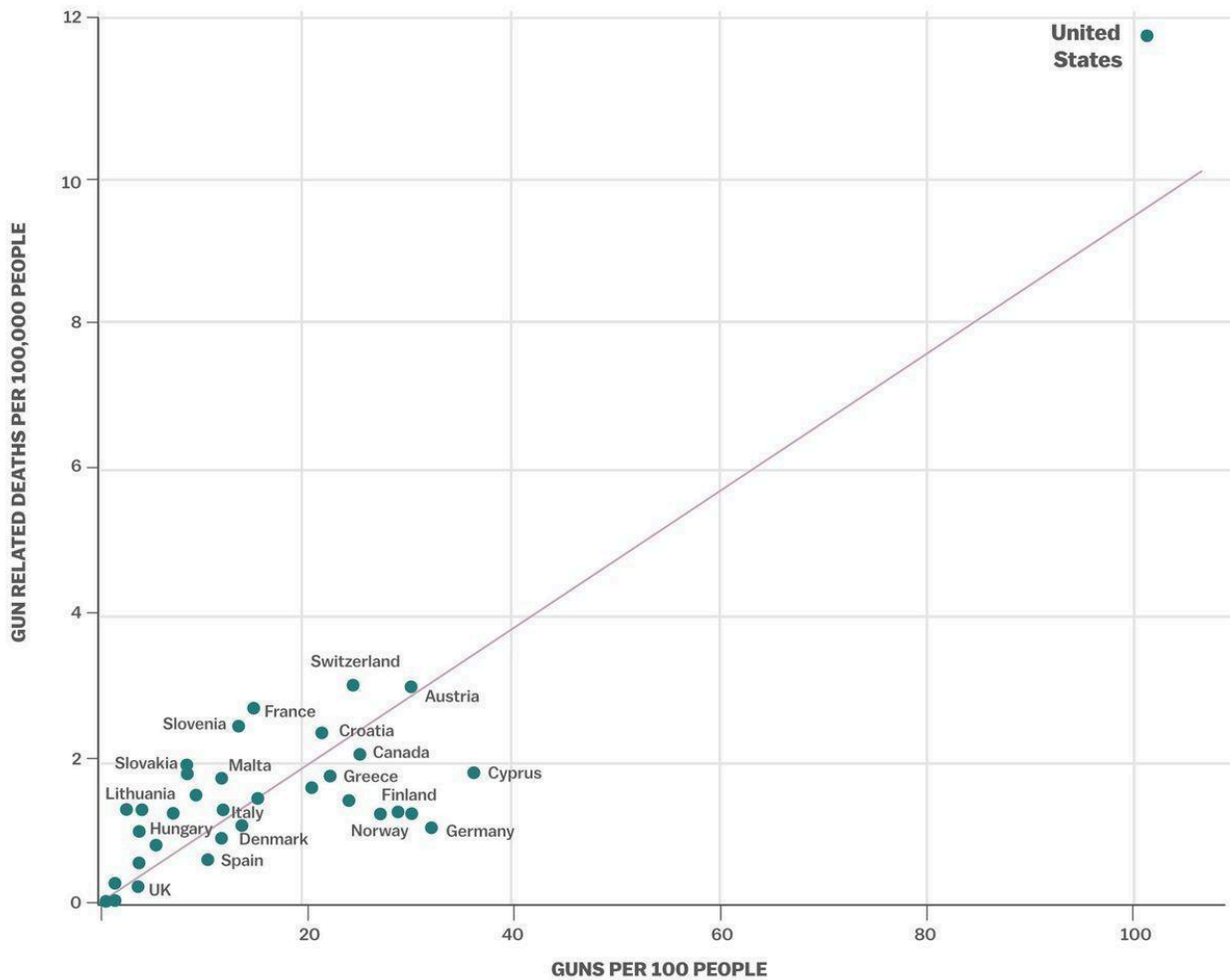


Another way of looking at that: Americans make up less than 5 percent of the world's population, yet they own roughly 45 percent of all the world's privately held firearms.

These two facts — on gun deaths and firearm ownership — are related. The research, compiled by the [Harvard School of Public Health's Injury Control Research Center](#), is pretty clear: After controlling for variables such as socioeconomic factors and other crime, places with more guns have more gun deaths. Researchers have found this to be true not just with [homicides](#), but also with [suicides](#) (which in recent years were [around 60 percent](#) of US gun deaths), [domestic violence](#), and even [violence against police](#).

For example, a 2013 [study](#), led by a Boston University School of Public Health researcher, found that, after controlling for multiple variables, each percentage point increase in gun ownership correlated with a roughly 0.9 percent rise in the firearm homicide rate.

This chart, based on data from [GunPolicy.org](#), shows the correlation between the number of guns and gun deaths (including homicides and suicides) among wealthier nations:



SOURCE: Gunpolicy.org , United Nations Development Programme



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Guns are not the only contributor to violence. (Other factors include, for example, poverty, urbanization, and alcohol consumption.) But when researchers control for other confounding variables, they have found time and time again that America's high levels of gun ownership are a major reason the US is so much worse in terms of gun violence than its developed peers.

2) The problem is guns, not mental illness

Supporters of gun rights look at America's high levels of gun violence and argue that guns are not the problem. They point to other issues, from [violence in video games and movies](#) to the [supposed breakdown of the traditional family](#).

Most recently, they've blamed mental health issues for mass shootings. This is the only policy issue that Trump mentioned in his first speech following the Florida shooting.

But as far as homicides go, people with mental illnesses are [more likely to be victims](#), not perpetrators, of violence. And Michael Stone, a psychiatrist at Columbia University who maintains a database of mass shooters, wrote in a 2015 [analysis](#) that only 52 out of the 235 killers in the database, or about 22 percent, had mental illnesses. "The mentally ill should not bear the burden of being regarded as the 'chief' perpetrators of mass murder," he concluded. [Other research](#) has [backed](#) this [up](#).

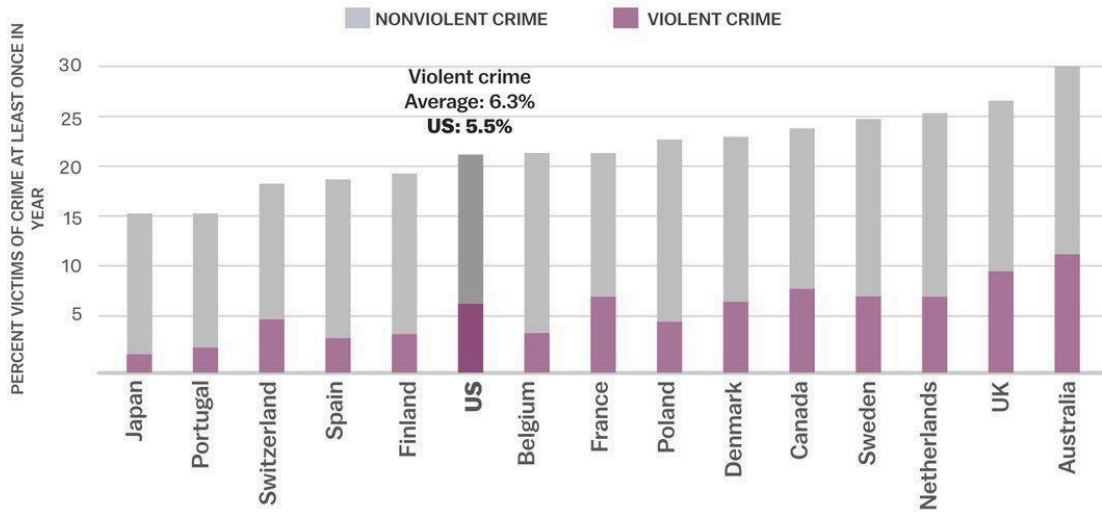
More broadly, America [does not have a monopoly on mental illness](#). That's not to say more access to mental health care wouldn't help; it could, for example, be effective for reducing the number of gun suicides. But mental health issues aren't what make the US stand out in terms of gun violence.

The problem that's unique to the US, instead, is guns — and America's abundance of them.

As a [breakthrough analysis](#) by UC Berkeley's Franklin Zimring and Gordon Hawkins in the 1990s found, it's not even that the US has more crime than other developed countries. This chart, based on [data](#) from Jeffrey Swanson at Duke University, shows that the US is not an outlier when it comes to overall crime:

CRIME in 15 industrialized countries

12-month prevalence rates for 11 index-crimes (year 2000)



SOURCE: Jeffrey Swanson. International Crime Victims Survey. Gallup Europe.

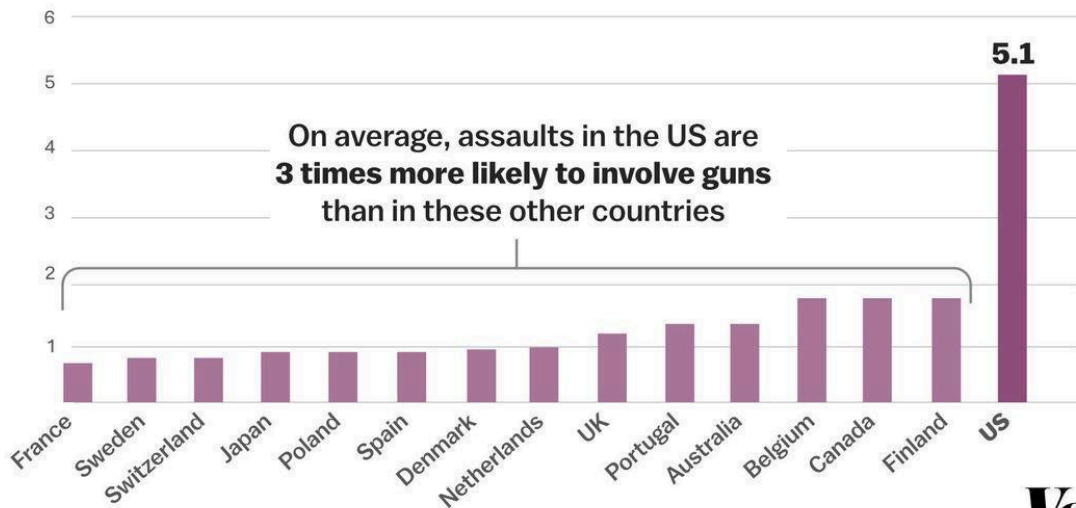
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Instead, the US appears to have more *lethal* violence — and that's driven in large part by the prevalence of guns.

"A series of specific comparisons of the death rates from property crime and assault in New York City and London show how enormous differences in death risk can be explained even while general patterns are similar," Zimring and Hawkins wrote. "A preference for crimes of personal force and the willingness and ability to use guns in robbery make similar levels of property crime 54 times as deadly in New York City as in London."

HOMICIDE in 15 industrialized countries

Rate per 100,000 per year (2012)



SOURCE: Jeffrey Swanson and OECD

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This is in many ways intuitive: People of every country get into arguments and fights with friends, family, and peers. But in the US, it's much more likely that someone will get angry at an argument and be able to pull out a gun and kill someone.

3) The research shows that gun control works

The research also suggests that gun control can work. A 2016 [review](#) of 130 studies in 10 countries, published in [Epidemiologic Reviews](#), [found](#) that new legal restrictions on owning and purchasing guns tended to be followed by a drop in gun violence — a strong indicator that restricting access to firearms can save lives.

Consider Australia's example.

In 1996, a 28-year-old man armed with a semiautomatic rifle [went on a rampage in Port Arthur, Australia](#), killing 35 people and wounding 23 more. It was the worst mass shooting in Australia's history.

Australian lawmakers responded with [legislation](#) that, among other provisions, banned certain types of firearms, such as automatic and semiautomatic rifles and shotguns. The Australian government confiscated 650,000 of these guns through a mandatory buyback program, in which it purchased firearms from

gun owners. It established a registry of all guns owned in the country and required a permit for all new firearm purchases. (This is much further than bills typically proposed in the US, which almost never make a serious attempt to *immediately* reduce the number of guns in the country.)

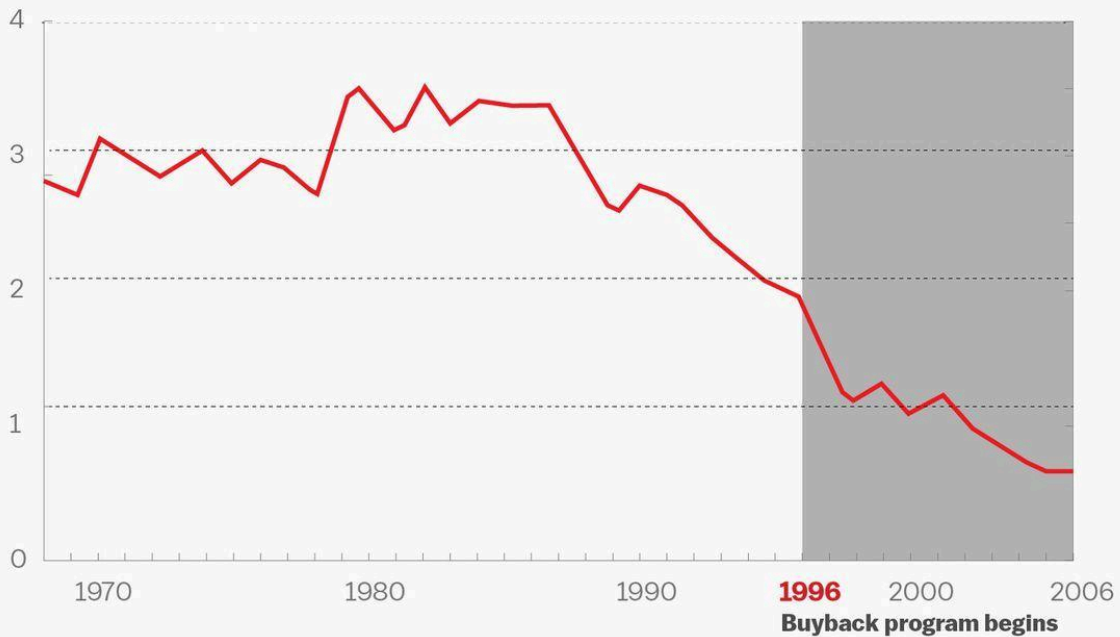
Australia's firearm homicide rate dropped by about 42 percent in the seven years after the law passed, and its firearm suicide rate fell by 57 percent, according to a [review of the evidence](#) by Harvard researchers.

It's difficult to know for sure how much of the drop in homicides and suicides was caused specifically by the gun buyback program and other legal changes. Australia's gun deaths, for one, were already declining before the law passed. But researchers [David Hemenway and Mary Vriniotis](#) argue that the gun buyback program very likely played a role: "First, the drop in firearm deaths was largest among the type of firearms most affected by the buyback. Second, firearm deaths in states with higher buyback rates per capita fell proportionately more than in states with lower buyback rates."

One [study](#) of the program, by Australian researchers, found that buying back 3,500 guns per 100,000 people correlated with up to a 50 percent drop in firearm homicides and a 74 percent drop in gun suicides. As [Dylan Matthews explained for Vox](#), the drop in homicides wasn't statistically significant because Australia already had a pretty low number of murders. But the drop in suicides most definitely was — and the results are striking.

Rate of firearm suicides after Australia's gun buyback program

Firearm suicides per 100,000 residents



SOURCE: IZA

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One other fact, noted by [Hemenway and Vriniotis](#) in 2011: “While 13 gun massacres (the killing of 4 or more people at one time) occurred in Australia in the 18 years before the [Australia gun control law], resulting in more than one hundred deaths, in the 14 following years (and up to the present), there were no gun massacres.”

4) State and local actions are not enough

A common counterpoint to the evidence on gun control: If it works so well, why does Chicago have so much gun violence despite having some of the strictest gun policies in the US?

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders [made this argument](#) after the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting: “I think if you look to Chicago, where you had over 4,000 victims of gun-related crimes last year, they have the strictest gun laws in the country. That certainly hasn’t helped there.”

It's true that Chicago has fairly strict gun laws (although [not the strictest](#)). And it's true that the city has fairly high levels of gun violence (although also [not the worst](#) in the US).

This doesn't, however, expose the failure of gun control altogether, but rather the limits of leaving gun policies to a patchwork of local and state laws. The basic problem: If a city or state passes strict gun control measures, people can simply cross a border to buy guns in a jurisdiction with laxer laws.

Chicago, for example, requires a Firearm Owners Identification card, a background check, a three-day waiting period, and documentation for all firearm sales. But Indiana, across the border, doesn't require any of this for purchases between two private individuals (including those at gun shows and those who meet through the internet), allowing even someone with a criminal record to buy a firearm without passing a background check or submitting paperwork recording the sale.

So someone from Chicago can drive across the border — to Indiana or to other places with lax gun laws — and buy a gun without any of the big legal hurdles he would face at home. Then that person can resell or give guns to others in Chicago, or keep them, leaving no paper trail behind. (This is illegal trafficking under [federal law](#), but Indiana's lax laws and enforcement — particularly the lack of a paper trail — make it virtually impossible to catch someone until a gun is used in a crime.)

The result: According to a 2014 [report](#) from the Chicago Police Department, nearly 60 percent of the guns in crime scenes that were recovered and traced between 2009 and 2013 came from outside the state. About 19 percent came from Indiana — making it the most common state of origin for guns besides Illinois.

This isn't exclusive to Chicago. A 2016 [report](#) from the [New York State Office of the Attorney General](#) found that 74 percent of guns used in crimes in New York between 2010 and 2015 came from states with lax gun laws. (The gun trafficking chain from Southern states with weak gun laws to New York is so well-known it even has a name: "[the Iron Pipeline](#).") And another 2016 [report](#) from the [US Government Accountability Office](#) found that most of the guns — as many as 70 percent — used in crimes in Mexico, which has strict gun laws, can be traced back to the US, which has [generally weaker gun laws](#).

That doesn't mean the stricter gun laws in Chicago, New York, or any other jurisdiction have no effect, but it does limit how far these local and state

measures can go, since the root of the problem lies in other places' laws. The only way the pipeline could be stopped would be if all states individually strengthened their gun laws at once — or, more realistically, if the federal government passed a law that enforces stricter rules across the US.

5) America probably needs to go further than anyone wants to admit

America's attention to gun control often focuses on a few specific measures: universal background checks, restrictions on people with mental illnesses buying firearms, and an assault weapons ban, for example. It is rare that American politicians, even on the left, go much further than that. Something like Australia's law — which amounts to a confiscation program — is never seriously considered.

As Matthews previously [explained](#), this is a big issue. The US's gun problem is so dire that it arguably needs solutions that go way further than what we typically see in mainstream proposals — at least, if the US ever hopes to get down to European levels of gun violence.

If the fundamental problem is that America has far too many guns, then policies need to cut the number of guns in circulation right now to seriously reduce the number of gun deaths. Background checks and other restrictions on who can buy a gun can't achieve that in the short term. What America likely needs, then, is something more like Australia's mandatory buyback program — essentially, a gun confiscation scheme — paired with a serious ban on specific firearms (including, potentially, [all semiautomatic weapons](#)).

But no one in Congress is seriously proposing something that sweeping. The [Manchin-Toomey bill](#), the only gun legislation in Congress after Sandy Hook that came close to becoming law, didn't even establish universal background checks. Recent proposals have been even milder, taking small steps like [banning bump stocks](#) or [slightly improving](#) the existing system for background checks.

Part of the holdup is the Second Amendment. While there is [reasonable scholarly debate](#) about whether the Second Amendment actually protects all Americans' individual right to bear arms and prohibits stricter forms of gun control, the reality is the Supreme Court and US lawmakers — backed by the powerful gun lobby, particularly the NRA — widely agree that the Second Amendment *does* put barriers on how far restrictions can go. That would likely

rule out anything like the Australian policy response short of a court reinterpretation or a repeal of the Second Amendment, neither of which seems likely.

So the US, for [political, cultural, and legal reasons](#), seems to be unable to take the action that it really needs.

None of that is to say that milder measures are useless. Connecticut's law requiring handgun purchasers to first pass a background check and obtain a license, for example, was followed by a [40 percent drop](#) in gun homicides and a [15 percent reduction](#) in handgun suicides. Similar results — in the reverse — were [reported in Missouri](#) when it repealed its own permit-to-purchase law. It's difficult to separate these changes from long-term trends (especially since gun homicides have generally [been on the decline](#) for decades now), but a [review of the evidence](#) by [RAND](#) linked milder gun control measures, including background checks, to reduced injuries and deaths — and that means these measures likely saved lives.

There are also some evidence-based policies that could help [outside the realm of gun control](#), including more stringent regulations and taxes on alcohol, changes in policing, and behavioral intervention programs.

But if America wants to get to the levels of gun deaths that its European peers report, it will likely need to go much, much further on guns in particular.

[Time is almost up](#)

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