

America's unique gun violence problem, explained in 17 maps and charts

In the developed world, these levels of gun violence are a uniquely American problem. Here's why.

By German Lopez | [@germanlopez](#) | [german.lopez@vox.com](#) | Updated Mar 24, 2018, 10:45am EDT

America is an exceptional country when it comes to guns. It's **one of the few countries** in which the right to bear arms is constitutionally protected. But America's relationship with guns is unique in another crucial way: Among developed nations, the US is far and away the most homicidal — in large part due to the easy access many Americans have to firearms. These maps and charts show what that violence looks like compared with the rest of the world, why it happens, and why it's such a tough problem to fix.

1) America has six times as many firearm homicides as Canada, and nearly 16 times as many as Germany

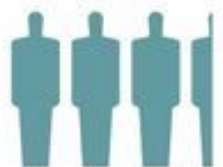
Homicides by firearm per 1 million people

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

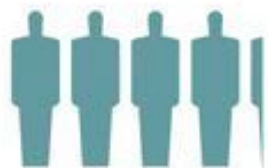




Denmark **2.7**



Netherlands **3.3**



Sweden **4.1**



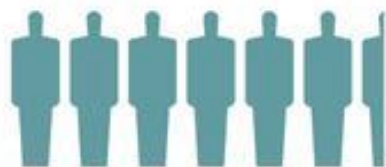
Finland **4.5**



Ireland **4.8**



Canada **5.1**



Luxembourg **6.2**



Belgium **6.8**



Switzerland **7.7**



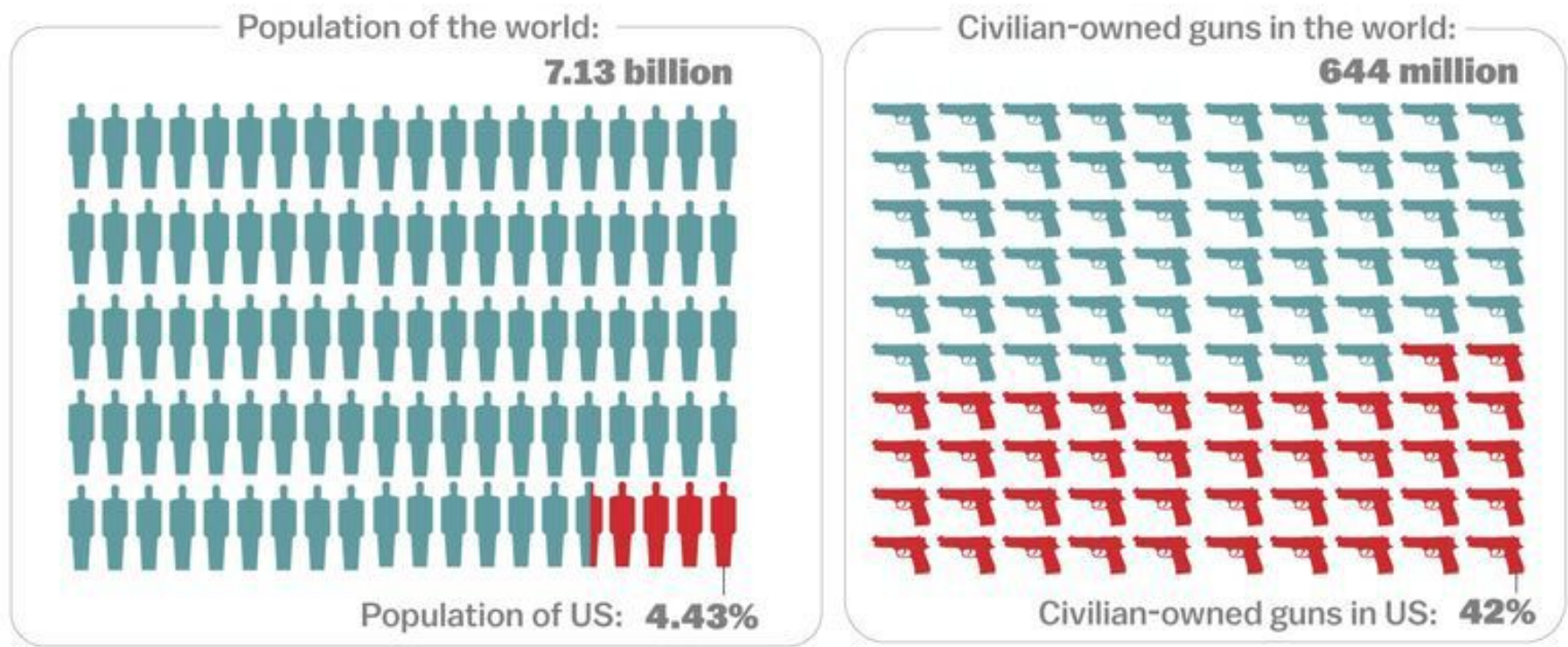
United States **29.7**

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

This chart, compiled using United Nations data collected by **Simon Rogers for the Guardian**, shows that America far and away leads other developed countries when it comes to gun-related homicides. Why? Extensive reviews of the research, compiled by the **Harvard School of Public Health’s Injury Control Research Center**, suggest the answer is pretty simple: The US is an outlier on gun violence because it has way more guns than other developed nations.

2) America has 4.4 percent of the world’s population, but almost half of the civilian-owned guns around the world

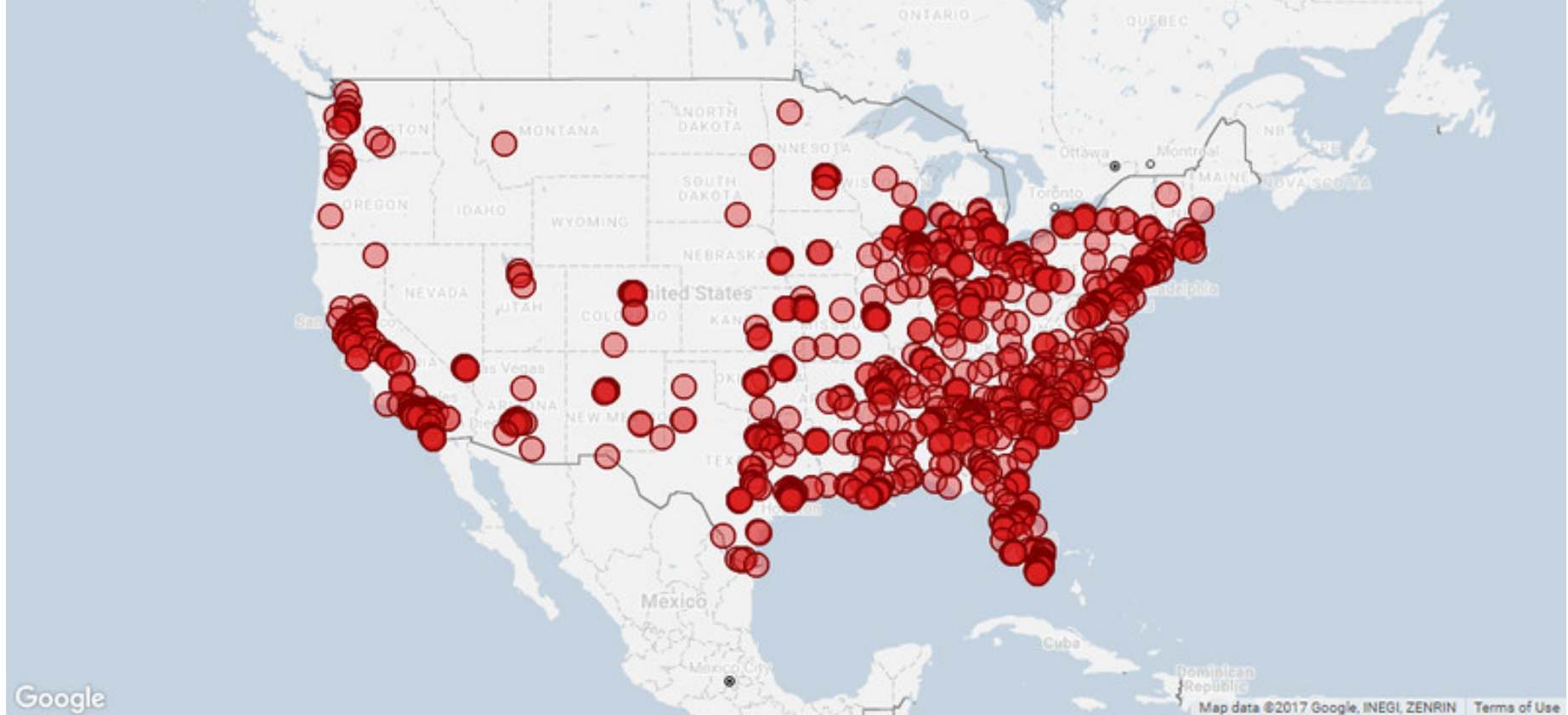
Americans own a ridiculous number of guns



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



3) There have been more than 1,600 mass shootings since Sandy Hook



Soo Oh/Vox

In December 2012, a gunman walked into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and killed 20 children, six adults, and himself. Since then, there have been **more than 1,600 mass shootings**, with more than 1,800 people killed and more than 6,400 wounded as of February 2018.

The numbers come from the **Gun Violence Archive**, which hosts a database that has tracked mass shootings since 2013. But since some shootings go unreported, the database is likely missing some, as well as the details of some of the events.

The tracker uses a fairly broad definition of “mass shooting”: It includes not just shootings in which four or more people were murdered, but shootings in which four or more people were shot at all (excluding the shooter).

Even under this broad definition, it’s worth noting that mass shootings make up a tiny portion of America’s firearm deaths, which totaled **nearly 39,000** in 2016 alone.

4) On average, there is around one mass shooting for each day in America

336 days, 355 mass shootings

Number of mass shootings (4+ victims, including shooter) by day of year, 2015



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Whenever a mass shooting occurs, supporters of gun rights often argue that it's inappropriate to bring up political debates about gun control in the aftermath of a tragedy. For example, former Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, a strong supporter of gun rights, **criticized** former President Barack Obama for “trying to score cheap political points” when Obama **mentioned** gun control after a **mass shooting in Charleston, South Carolina**.

But if this argument is followed to its logical end, then it will just about never be the right time to discuss gun control, as **Christopher Ingraham pointed out at the Washington Post**. Under the broader definition of mass shootings, America has around one mass shooting a day. So if lawmakers are forced to wait for a time when there isn't a mass shooting to talk gun control, they could find themselves waiting for a very long time.

5) States with more guns have more gun deaths

Gun Ownership vs. Gun Deaths



2013 DATA. SOURCES: INJURY PREVENTION (GUN OWNERSHIP); CDC (DEATHS)

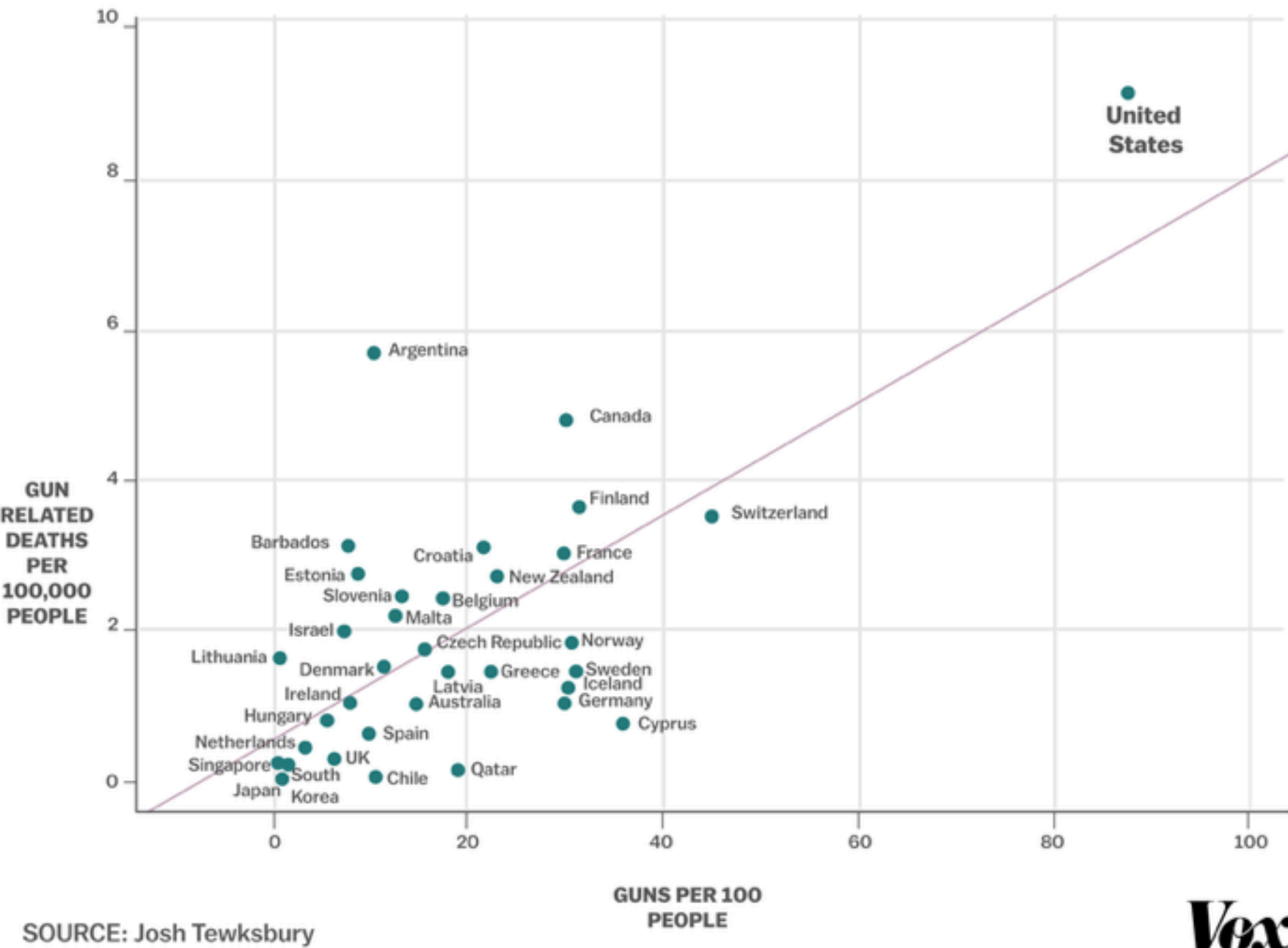
Mother Jones

Mother Jones

Using data from a **study** in *Injury Prevention* and the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**, **Mother Jones** put together the chart above that shows states with more guns tend to have far more gun deaths, including homicides and suicides. This has been found across the empirical research: “Within the United States, a wide array of empirical evidence indicates that more guns in a community leads to more homicide,” David Hemenway, the Harvard Injury Control Research Center’s director, wrote in ***Private Guns, Public Health***.

Read more in Mother Jones’s **“10 Pro-Gun Myths, Shot Down.”**

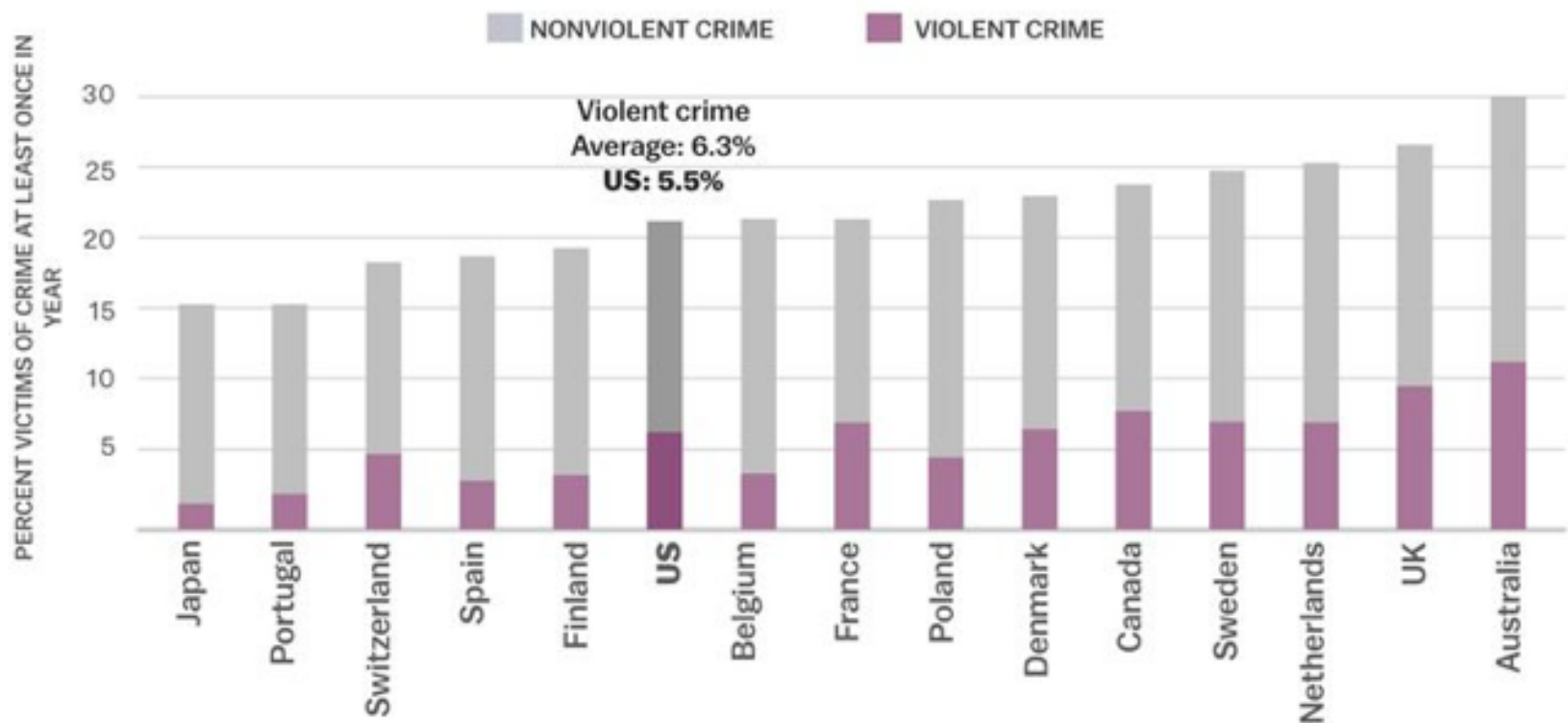
6) It's not just the US: Developed countries with more guns also have more gun deaths



7) America is an outlier when it comes to gun deaths, but not 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.

Vox

It would be one thing if the US happened to have more crime than other nations, but the existing data shows that not to be the case. America is only an outlier when it comes to homicides and, specifically, gun violence, according to **data** from Jeffrey Swanson at Duke University.

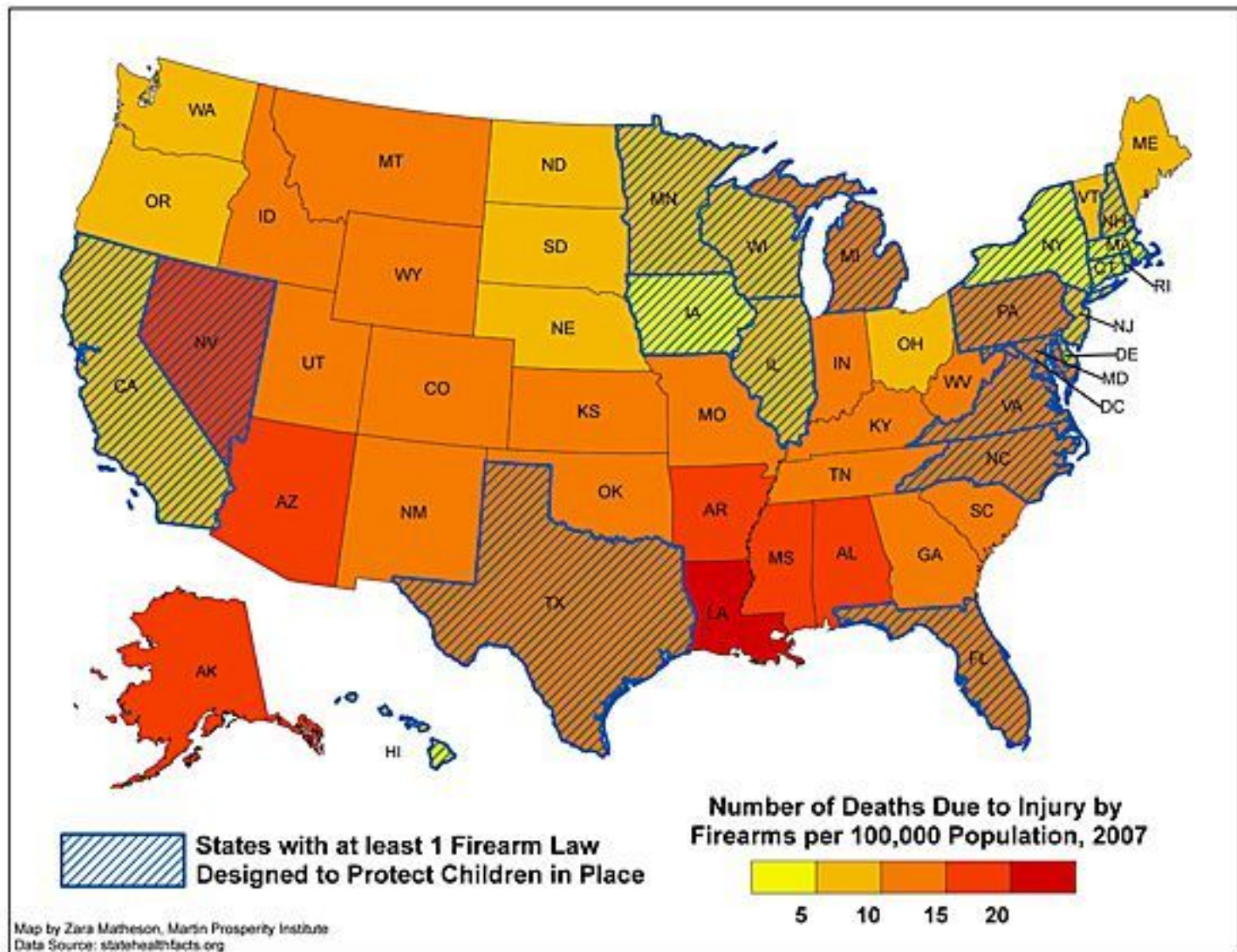
As **Zack Beauchamp explained for Vox**, a breakthrough analysis in 1999 by UC Berkeley's Franklin Zimring and Gordon Hawkins found that the US does not, contrary to the old conventional wisdom, have more crime in general than other Western industrial nations. Instead, the US appears to have more *lethal* 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.”

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.

8) States with tighter gun control laws have fewer gun-related deaths



Zara Matheson/Martin Prosperity Institute

When economist **Richard Florida** took a look at gun deaths and other social indicators, he found that higher populations, more stress, more immigrants, and more mental illness didn't correlate with more gun deaths. But he did find one telling correlation: States with tighter gun control laws have fewer gun-related deaths. (Read more at Florida's "**The Geography of Gun Deaths.**")

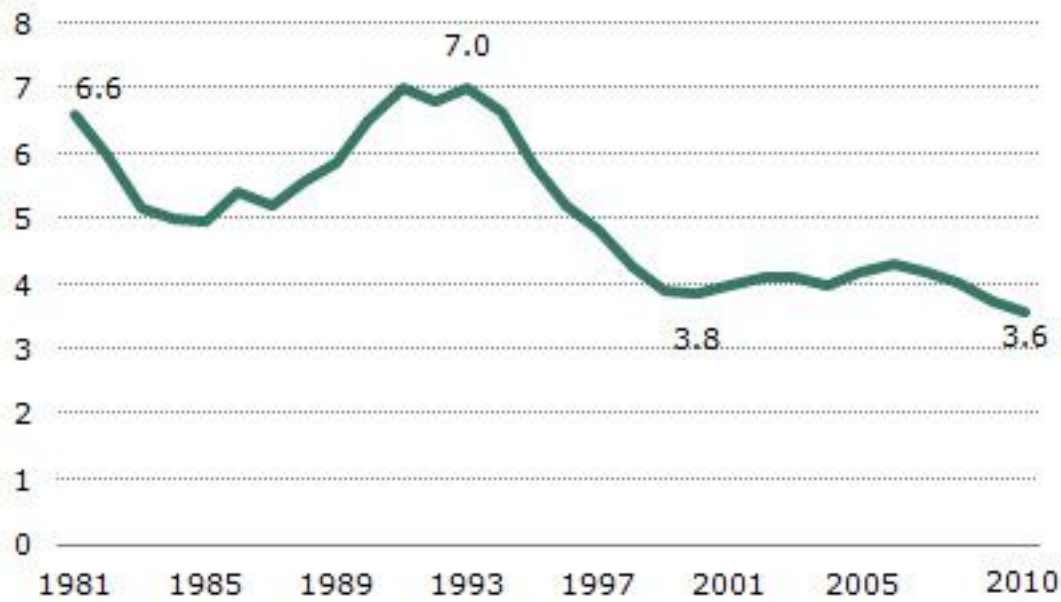
This is backed by other research: A 2016 **review** of 130 studies in 10 countries, published in ***Epidemiologic Reviews***, found that new legal restrictions on owning and purchasing guns tended to be followed by a drop in gun violence — a strong indicator that restricting access to guns can save lives.

9) Still, gun homicides (like all homicides) have declined over the past couple

decades

Rate of Firearm Homicide Deaths, 1981-2010

Per 100,000 people



Note: Data labels shown for 1981, 1993, 2000 and 2010.

Source: CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS)

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The good news is that firearm homicides, like **all homicides and crime**, have declined over the past two decades. (Although that may have changed **in 2015 and 2016**, with a recent rise in murders nationwide.)

There's still a lot of debate among criminal justice experts about why this crime drop is occurring. Some of the most credible ideas include mass incarceration, more and better policing, and reduced lead exposure from gasoline. But one theory that researchers have widely debunked is the idea that **more guns have deterred crime** — in fact, the opposite may be true, based on research compiled by the **Harvard School of Public Health's Injury Control Center**.

10) Most gun deaths are suicides



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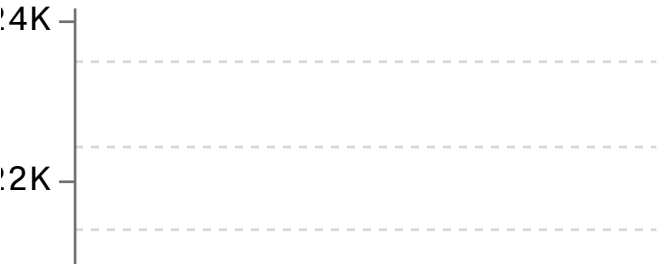


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Firearm suicides versus homicides



Although America's political debate about guns tends to focus on grisly mass shootings and murders, a majority of gun-related deaths in the US are suicides. As **Dylan Matthews explained for Vox**, this is actually one of the most compelling reasons for reducing access to guns: There is a **lot of research** that shows greater access to guns dramatically increases the risk of suicide.

11) The states with the most guns report the most suicides




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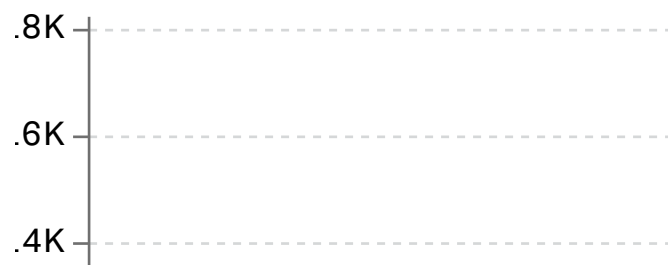


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More guns, more suicides

Reported suicides between 2001 and 2005 in states with the highest and lowest rates of gun ownership





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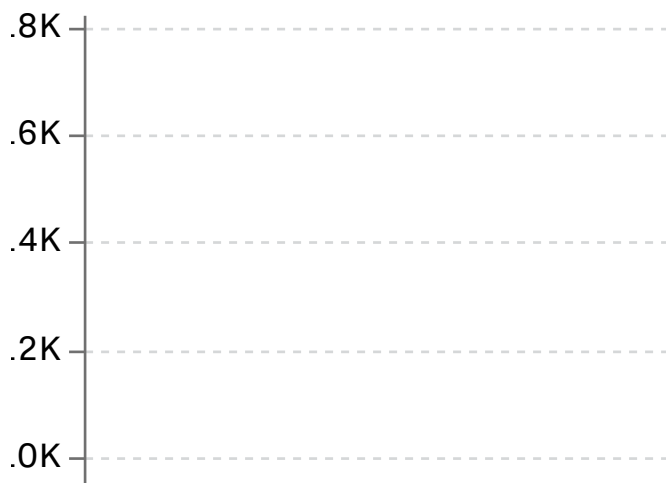


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More guns, more suicides

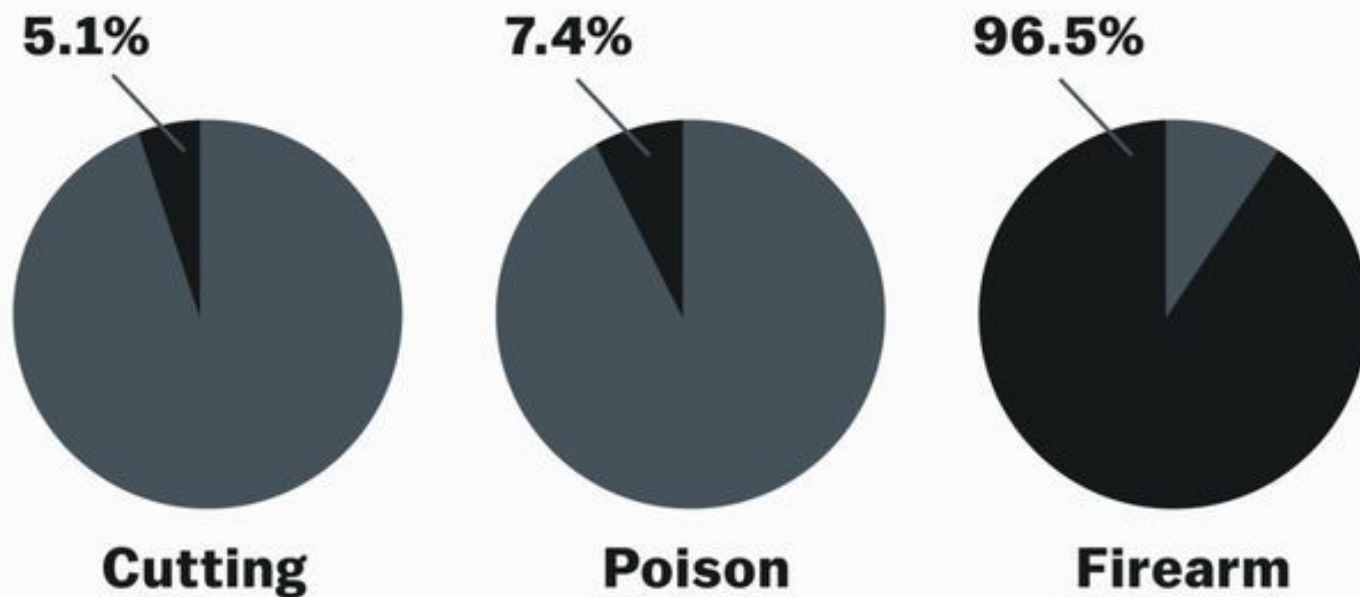
Reported suicides between 2001 and 2005 in states with the highest and lowest rates of gun ownership



12) Guns allow people to kill themselves much more easily

Fatal suicide attempts

Indiana 1990-1997



SOURCE: Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health

Vox

Estelle Caswell/Vox

Perhaps *the* reason access to guns so strongly contributes to suicides is that guns are much deadlier than alternatives like cutting and poison.

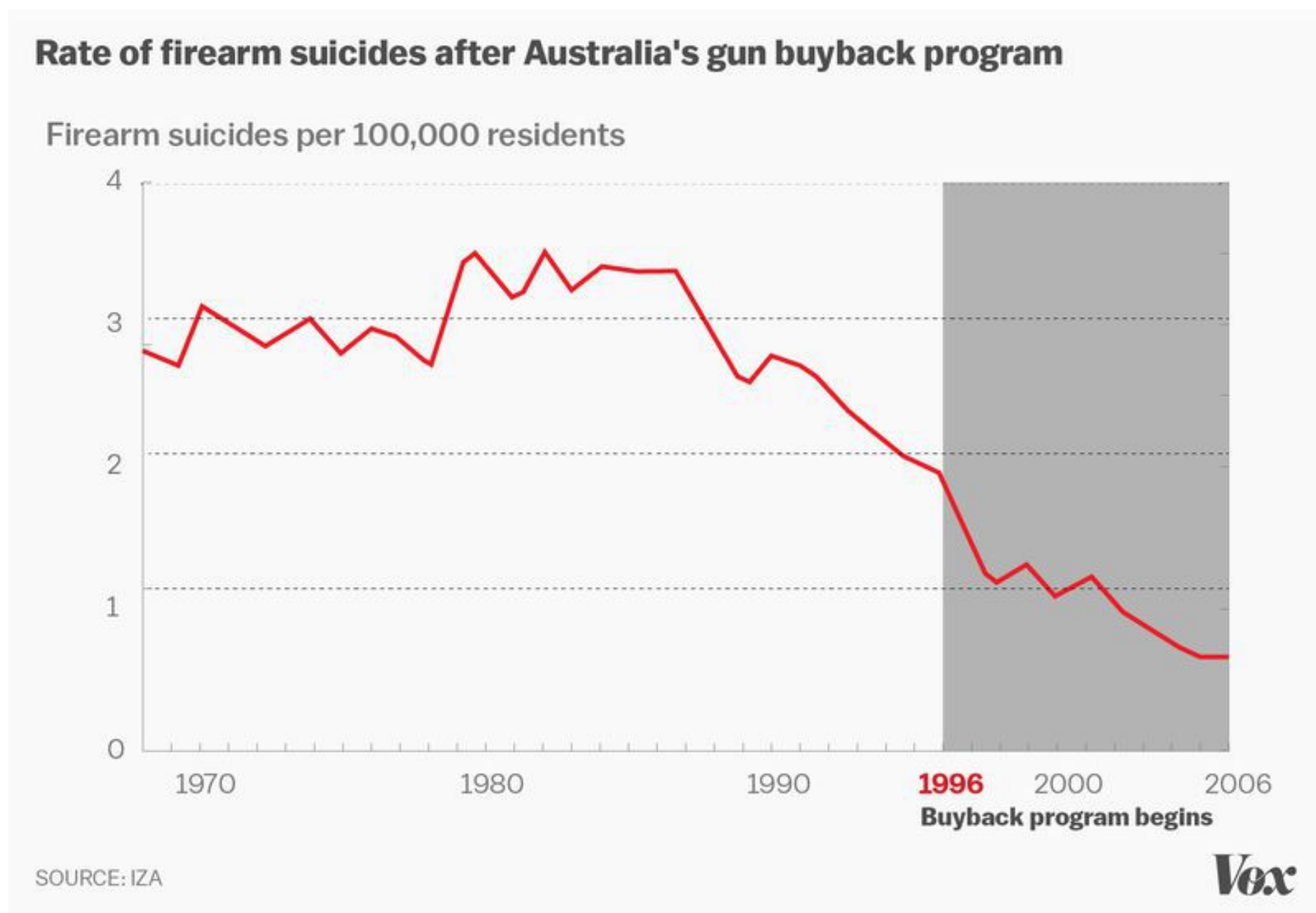
Jill Harkavy-Friedman, vice president of research for the **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention**, **previously explained** that this is why reducing access to guns can be so important to preventing suicides: Just stalling an attempt or making it less likely to result in death makes a huge difference.

“Time is really key to preventing suicide in a suicidal person,” Harkavy-Friedman said. “First, the crisis won’t last, so it will seem less dire and less hopeless with time. Second, it opens the opportunity for someone to help or for the suicidal person to reach out to someone to help. That’s why limiting access to lethal means is so powerful.”

She added, “[I]f we keep the method of suicide away from a person when they consider it, in that moment they will not switch to another method. It doesn’t mean they never

will. But in that moment, their thinking is very inflexible and rigid. So it's not like they say, 'Oh, this isn't going to work. I'm going to try something else.' They generally can't adjust their thinking, and they don't switch methods."

13) Policies that limit access to guns have decreased suicides



Estelle Caswell/Vox

When countries reduced access to guns, they saw a drop in the number of firearm suicides. The data above, taken from a **study** by Australian researchers, shows that suicides dropped dramatically after the Australian government set up a mandatory gun buyback program that reduced the number of firearms in the country by about one-fifth.

The Australian study 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 (in large part because murders in Australia were already so low). But the drop in suicides most definitely was — and the results are striking.

Australia is far from alone in these types of results. A **study** from Israeli researchers found that suicides among Israeli soldiers dropped by 40 percent when the military stopped letting soldiers take their guns home over the weekend. The change was most pronounced during the weekends.

This data and research have a clear message: States and countries can significantly reduce the number of suicides by restricting access to guns.

14) In states with more guns, more police officers are also killed on duty



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Police are more likely to be killed in homicides in states with more guns

Homicides per 10,000 law enforcement officers

Given that states with more guns tend to have more homicides, it isn't too surprising that, as a **study** in the *American Journal of Public Health* found, states with more guns also have more cops die in the line of duty.

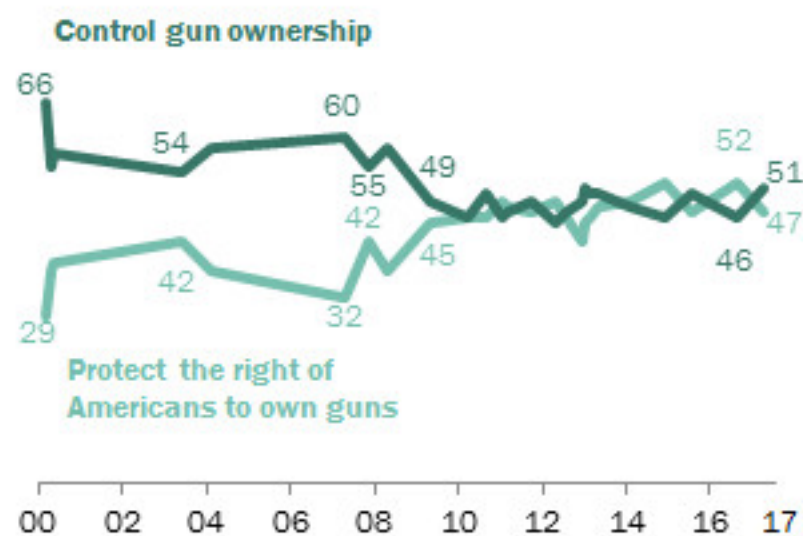
Researchers looked at federal data for firearm ownership and homicides of police officers across the US over 15 years. They found that states with more gun ownership had more cops killed in homicides: Every 10 percent increase in firearm ownership correlated with 10 additional officers killed in homicides over the 15-year study period.

The findings could help explain why US police officers **appear** to kill more people than cops in other developed countries. For US police officers, the higher rates of guns and gun violence — even against them — in America mean that they not only will encounter more guns and violence, but they can *expect* to encounter more guns and deadly violence, making them more likely to anticipate and perceive a threat and use deadly force as a result.

15) Support for gun ownership has sharply increased since the early 2000s

Public remains closely divided on controlling guns and protecting rights

% saying it is more important to ...



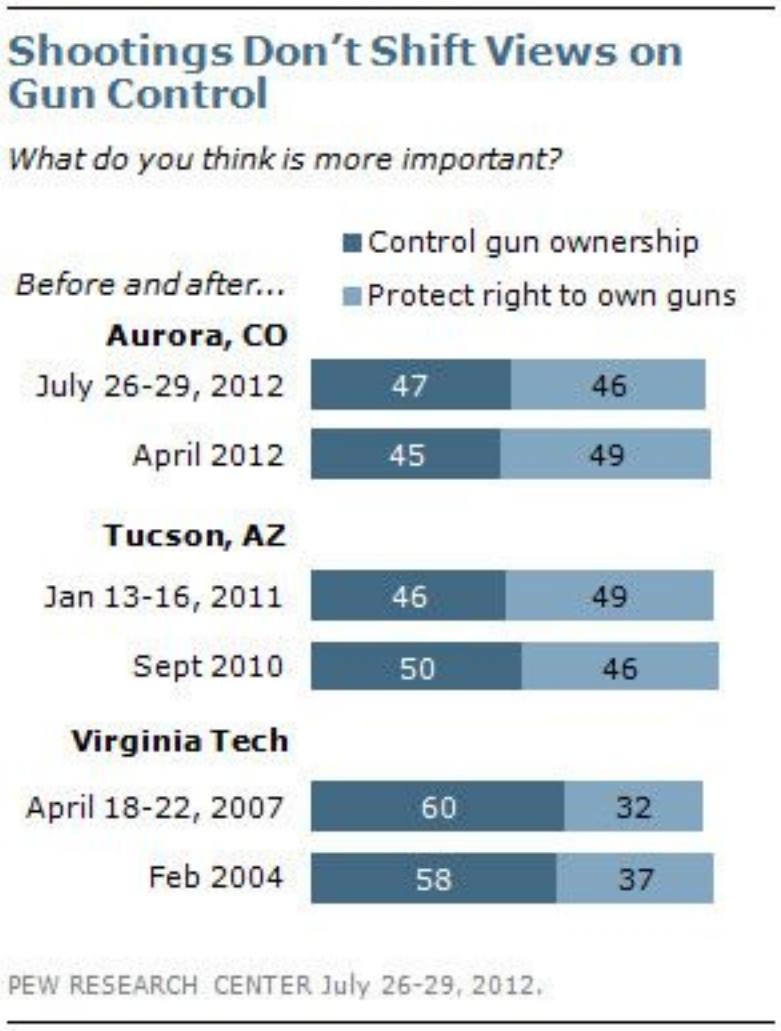
Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 5-11, 2017.
"America's Complex Relationship With Guns"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Over the past two decades, Americans have shifted from mostly supporting the concept of gun control to greater support for protecting “the right of Americans to own guns,” according to **Pew Research Center surveys**. This shift has happened even as major mass shootings, such as the attacks on Columbine High School and Sandy Hook

Elementary School, have received more press attention.

16) High-profile shootings don't appear to lead to more support for gun control in the long term

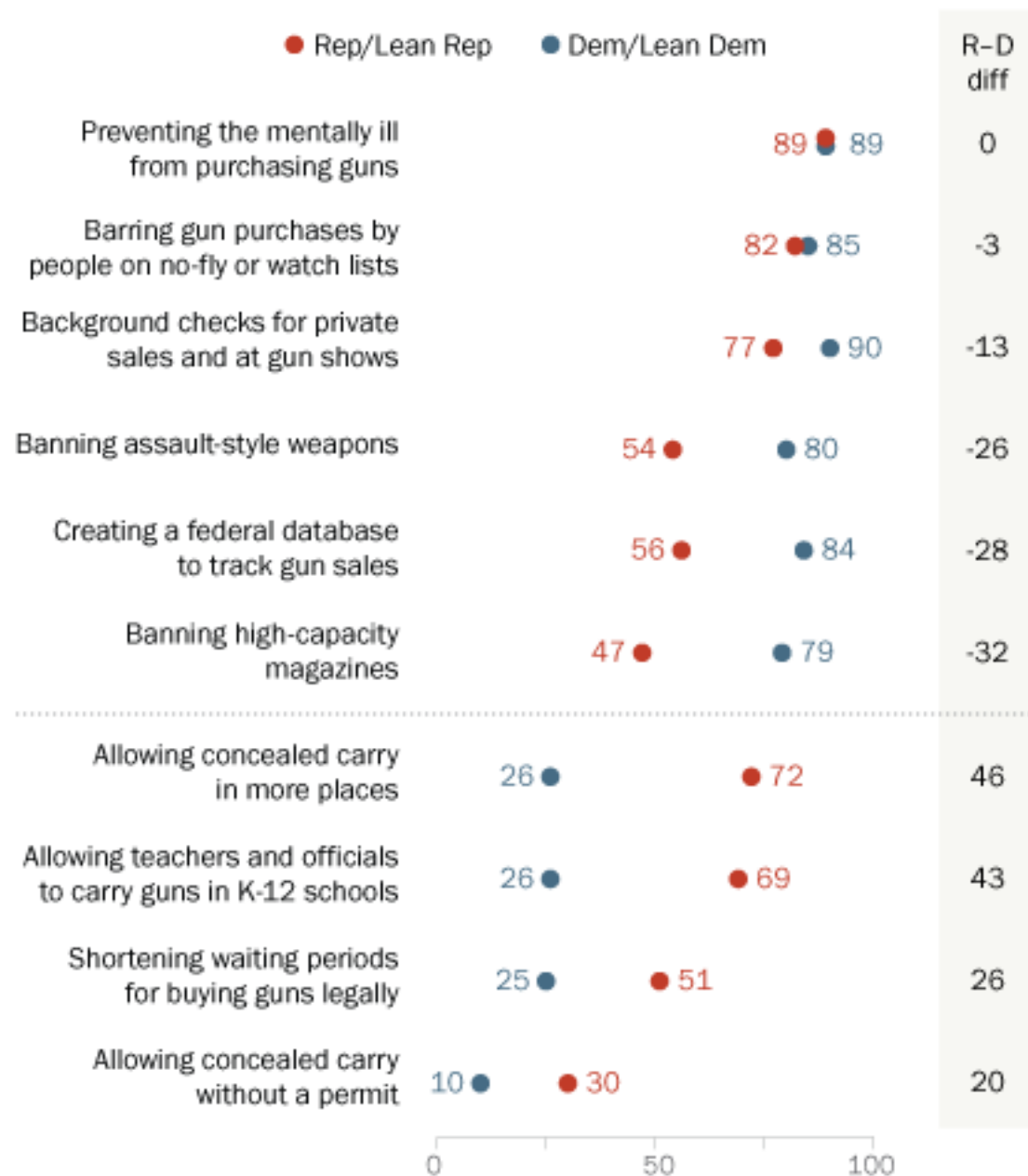


Although mass shootings are often viewed as some of the worst acts of gun violence, they seem to have little effect on public opinion about gun rights, based on **surveys** from the Pew Research Center. That helps explain why Americans' support for the right to own guns appears to have risen over the past few decades even as more mass shootings made the news.

17) Specific gun control policies are fairly popular

Partisan gap in views of concealed carry is among widest on gun policy proposals

% who strongly or somewhat favor ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 13-27 and April 4-18, 2017.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Although most Americans say they want to protect the right to own firearms, most also back many gun control proposals — such as stronger background checks, a database to track gun sales, and banning assault-style weapons, according to **Pew Research Center surveys**.

This type of contradiction isn't exclusive to gun policy issues. For example, although most Americans in the past said they **don't like Obamacare**, most of them also said they like the **specific policies in the health care law**. Americans just don't like some policy ideas until you get specific.

For people who believe the empirical evidence that more guns mean more violence, this contradiction is the source of a lot of frustration. Americans by and large support policies that reduce access to guns. But once these policies are proposed, they're broadly spun by politicians and pundits into attempts to "take away your guns." So nothing gets done, and preventable deaths keep occurring.