

Guns: An American Conversation

FACTSHEET

People who discuss the role of guns in American life often want more information about gun statistics and regulations as well as the guns themselves. If you are in the midst of a gun dialogue, we hope this compilation proves helpful.

Created for [Guns: An American Conversation](#), a collaboration between Advance Local, Spaceship Media, and Essential Partners

GUN DEATH BY THE NUMBERS

by Stephen Koff, Advance Local

The number of firearms deaths in the United States

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, tracks deaths in the United States [by cause](#). The latest full year's worth of data covers 2016. In raw numbers, here are total firearms deaths in the United States over five years, via data from the CDC.

2016: 38,658

2015: 36,252

2014: 33,594

2013: 33,636

2012: 33,563

How that changes when accounting for our growing population

The CDC puts the numbers in context by measuring them on the basis of population (deaths per 100,000 people). It also adjusts that rate based on the age of the United States population, which some authorities say is a more meaningful figure when looking at deaths from all causes because incidences of some deaths differ by age. The differences in the per-capita rates involving gun deaths are relatively slight.

2016: 11.96 gun deaths per 100,000 people, or 11.73 on an age-adjusted basis.

2015: 11.30 firearm deaths per 100,000 people, or 11.03 on an age-adjusted basis

2014: 10.55 firearm deaths per 100,000 people, or 10.26 on an age-adjusted basis

2013: 10.64 firearm deaths per 100,000 people, or 10.38 on an age-adjusted basis

2012: 10.69 firearm deaths per 100,000 people, or 10.45 on an age-adjusted basis

The breakdown for homicide, suicide and other gun deaths

In 2016, firearms deaths were counted this way by the CDC:

- Suicide: 59.3 percent of gun deaths, or 22,938 in raw numbers.
- Homicide: 37.28 percent of gun deaths, or 14,415 in raw numbers.*
- Legal intervention: 1.31 percent of gun deaths, or 510 in raw numbers, were legal interventions, [which means](#) deaths as a result of police interaction. These include deaths by gunfire as well as what is loosely known as “suicide by cop,” in which someone intentionally provokes law enforcement to the point of gunfire.*
- Unintentional shootings: 1.28 percent of gun deaths, or 495 in raw numbers, were classified as unintentional.
- Undetermined: 0.77 percent of gun deaths, or 300 in raw numbers, resulted from undetermined intent.
- (* Data for homicides and legal interventions are counted together in some analyses, and the CDC makes such a method of counting available. We have chosen to give a fuller breakdown, as provided by the CDC.)

How the homicide rate changed in recent years

[Academic studies](#) and media reports described a spike in big-city homicides in 2015 and 2016. CDC data bear this out.

In 2015, 35.8 percent of gun deaths were attributed to homicides. In 2016, 37.28 percent were.

But in 2014, a lower share of gun deaths — 32.76 percent — were from homicides, and 33.3 percent were in 2013. The share was slightly higher one year earlier — in 2012 — when 34.62 percent of gun deaths in the United States were categorized as homicides, but that still was lower than in 2016.

To make an apples-to-apples comparison, there were 11,622 homicide deaths involving firearms in 2012, for an age-adjusted rate of 3.76 firearm-homicides per 100,000 population. But by 2016, the number of homicides with firearms reached 14,415, for an age-adjusted rate of 4.60 per 100,000 population. As a raw number, that's not large. As a change in the rate, it is.

But that's just five years of data.

Longer-term trends

CDC databases allow for comparisons dating to 1981. A comparison of the 35-years span of data, 1981 to 2016, show deaths from guns have dropped dramatically, and so have the share attributable to homicides. The numbers here are for firearms deaths per 100,000 population, age-adjusted, and corresponding rates strictly for firearms homicides.

Year Total firearms death rate Firearms homicide rate

1981	14.64	6.34
1991:	14.82	6.64
2001:	10.31	3.93
2011:	10.16	3.59
2016:	11.73	4.60

Notice the dramatic drop in homicides by 2001? What happened?

The Pew Research Center said in [a report](#) that demographics played a role. “The outsized post-World War II baby boom, which produced a large number of people in the high-crime ages of 15 to 20 in the 1960s and 1970s, helped drive crime up in those years,” Pew said. But the crime rate declined in the early 1980s “as the young boomers got older, then a flare-up by mid-decade in conjunction with a rising street market for crack cocaine, especially in big cities.”

By the early 1990s, however, “crack markets withered in part because of lessened demand, and the vibrant national economy made it easier for even low-skilled young people to find jobs rather than get involved in crime.

“At the same time, a rising number of people ages 30 and older were incarcerated, due in part to stricter laws, which helped restrain violence among this age group.”

It is less clear, Pew said, that innovative policing strategies and police crackdowns on use of guns by younger adults played a significant role in reducing crime. “Some researchers have proposed additional explanations as to why crime levels plunged so suddenly, including increased access to abortion and lessened exposure to lead.” These were theories, not conclusive findings.

“Crime reductions took place across the country in the 1990s, but since 2000, patterns have varied more by metropolitan area or city,” Pew said in the report, issued in 2013.

The number of firearms deaths compared with deaths from other causes

The number and cause of other deaths in 2016 categorized as injury-related for CDC statistical purposes were:

Drowning: 4,628.

Fire: 3,284

Poisoning: 68,995. This includes deaths resulting from unintentional or intentional overdose of a drug.

Transportation-related, including accidents involving cars, motorcycles and pedestrians: 42,436

When compared with all causes of death, including disease, homicide was the 16th leading cause in 2015, and guns were used in roughly 73 percent of those deaths, a [CDC report](#) said. Far more prevalent, in rank of first through fifth, were heart disease, cancer, chronic lower respiratory diseases, unintentional accidents and stroke.

Suicide came in at number 10. Guns were used in half of all suicides, the report said.

How the numbers change by age group

As this chart from the CDC shows, different causes of death are more prevalent in certain age groups. In 2015, homicides were listed as a third major cause of death for both the age 15-24 and the 25-34 cohorts. Suicide was second.

By age 35-44, homicides had dropped considerably.

10 Leading Causes of Death by Age Group, United States – 2015

Rank	<1	1-4	5-9	10-14	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Total
1	Congenital Anomalies 4,825	Unintentional Injury 1,235	Unintentional Injury 755	Unintentional Injury 763	Unintentional Injury 12,514	Unintentional Injury 19,795	Unintentional Injury 17,818	Malignant Neoplasms 43,054	Malignant Neoplasms 116,122	Heart Disease 507,138	Heart Disease 633,842
2	Short Gestation 4,084	Congenital Anomalies 435	Malignant Neoplasms 437	Malignant Neoplasms 428	Suicide 5,491	Suicide 6,947	Malignant Neoplasms 10,909	Heart Disease 34,248	Heart Disease 76,872	Malignant Neoplasms 419,389	Malignant Neoplasms 595,930
3	SIDS 1,568	Homicide 369	Congenital Anomalies 181	Suicide 409	Homicide 4,733	Homicide 4,863	Heart Disease 10,387	Unintentional Injury 21,499	Unintentional Injury 19,488	Chronic Low. Respiratory Disease 131,804	Chronic Low. Respiratory Disease 155,041
4	Maternal Pregnancy Comp. 1,522	Malignant Neoplasms 354	Homicide 140	Homicide 158	Malignant Neoplasms 1,469	Malignant Neoplasms 3,704	Suicide 6,936	Liver Disease 8,874	Chronic Low. Respiratory Disease 17,457	Cerebro-vascular 120,156	Unintentional Injury 146,571
5	Unintentional Injury 1,291	Heart Disease 147	Heart Disease 85	Congenital Anomalies 156	Heart Disease 997	Heart Disease 3,522	Homicide 2,895	Suicide 8,751	Diabetes Mellitus 14,166	Alzheimer's Disease 109,495	Cerebro-vascular 140,323
6	Placenta Cord. Membranes 910	Influenza & Pneumonia 88	Chronic Low. Respiratory Disease 80	Heart Disease 125	Congenital Anomalies 386	Liver Disease 844	Liver Disease 2,861	Diabetes Mellitus 6,212	Liver Disease 13,278	Diabetes Mellitus 56,142	Alzheimer's Disease 110,561
7	Bacterial Sepsis 599	Septicemia 54	Influenza & Pneumonia 44	Chronic Low Respiratory Disease 93	Chronic Low Respiratory Disease 202	Diabetes Mellitus 798	Diabetes Mellitus 1,986	Cerebro-vascular 5,307	Cerebro-vascular 12,116	Unintentional Injury 51,395	Diabetes Mellitus 79,535
8	Respiratory Distress 462	Perinatal Period 50	Cerebro-vascular 42	Cerebro-vascular 42	Diabetes Mellitus 196	Cerebro-vascular 567	Cerebro-vascular 1,788	Chronic Low. Respiratory Disease 4,345	Suicide 7,739	Influenza & Pneumonia 48,774	Influenza & Pneumonia 57,062
9	Circulatory System Disease 428	Cerebro-vascular 42	Benign Neoplasms 39	Influenza & Pneumonia 39	Influenza & Pneumonia 184	HIV 529	HIV 1,055	Septicemia 2,542	Septicemia 5,774	Nephritis 41,258	Nephritis 49,959
10	Neonatal Hemorrhage 406	Chronic Low Respiratory Disease 40	Septicemia 31	Two Tied: Benign Neo./Septicemia 33	Cerebro-vascular 166	Congenital Anomalies 443	Septicemia 829	Nephritis 2,124	Nephritis 5,452	Septicemia 30,817	Suicide 44,193

Data Source: National Vital Statistics System, National Center for Health Statistics, CDC.
Produced by: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC using WISQARS™.



Sources:

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [Fatal Injury Reports, National, Regional and State, 1981 – 2016](#), data searched April 10, 2018.

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics [fact sheet on homicides](#).

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Vital Statistics Reports, [“Deaths: Final data for 2015.”](#)

[“Death by legal intervention.”](#) Psychology Benefits Society, July 2, 2015.

National Institute of Justice, [“Assessing and Responding to the Recent Homicide Rise in the United States.”](#) November 2017.

[“Gun homicide rate down 49% since 1993 peak; public unaware.”](#) Pew Research Center, May 7, 2013.

ACCIDENTAL GUN DEATHS

by John Counts, *Advance Local*

“There are thousands of accidental shootings each year, including about 600 fatalities,” according to “[The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know](#),” by Philip J. Cook and Kristin A. Goss.

From a Los Angeles Times story, “[Amid rising gun violence, accidental shootings have plummeted. Why?](#)” dated Jan. 1, 2018: “There were 489 people killed in unintentional shootings in the U.S. in 2015, the most recent year for which data is available. That was down from 824 deaths in 1999, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Taking into account population growth over that time, the rate fell 48%.”

Here’s a link to the [CDC report](#), which has the 2015 number (489) cited in the LA Times story. It’s on page 33 and has it broken down by age groups. Coincidentally, it’s right next to accidental drownings (3,602 in 2015). Broken down by age groups, accidental discharge of firearms in 2015 accounted for 1 death of a baby under one, 25 children ages 1-4, 22 children ages 4-15, 121 people ages 15-21, 79 people ages 25-34, 59 people ages 35-45, 57 people ages 45-54, 55 people ages 55-64, 45 people 65-74, 18 people ages 65-84 and seven people ages 85 and over.

2015 seems to be the most recent number out there. The Pew Research Center, which also got their data from the CDC, has [this report](#) from five years earlier: “In 2010, there were 31,672 deaths in the U.S. from firearm injuries, mainly through suicide (19,392) and homicide (11,078), according to CDC compilation of data from death certificates. The remaining firearm deaths were attributed to accidents, shootings by police and unknown causes.” That’s 1,202 firearm deaths in 2010 that weren’t suicides or homicides.

WHO OWNS AMERICA'S GUNS?

by Stephen Koff, Advance Local

Americans have “a deep history and a complex relationship with guns,” [writes](#) Ruth Igielnik and Anna Brown of the [Pew Research Center](#). Our attitudes toward guns can reflect personal and cultural experiences, perceptions of ourselves and others, and more.

But the basic question of who owns guns is easier to answer, in part because the Pew Research Center has done extensive polling over recent years. The results are not only revealing but can help toward understanding differences in gun-ownership beliefs.

Here are some of the [findings on gun ownership](#) from respondents who participated in Pew's March and April 2017 survey panels, involving 3,930 respondents nationwide.

Guns in households

Thirty percent of American adults say they currently own a gun, and another 11 percent say they don't personally own a gun but live with someone who does.

That puts the share of gun-owning households in the United States at 42 percent. (Rounding accounts for the slight math difference.)

Among those who don't currently own a gun, 52 percent of adults say they could see themselves owning one in the future, and 71 percent who owned one in the past could see owning another.

THE SECOND AMENDMENT AND THE COURTS

by Stephen Koff, Advance Local

What does the Second Amendment say?

“A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”

How has the U.S. Supreme Court interpreted that?

There have been two primary interpretations over the last 80 years. In 1938, the Supreme Court ruled in [United States v. Miller](#) that Congress could regulate a sawed-off shotgun that had moved in interstate commerce under the National Firearms Act of 1934 because the evidence did not suggest that the shotgun “has some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia...,” according to Cornell Law School’s Legal Information Institute. The court then explained “that the Framers included the Second Amendment to ensure the effectiveness of the military.”

Then in 2008, the high court ruled 5-4 that the right to firearms was an individual right, not just a collective one — that is, it is linked not only to a militia but also to “the inherent right of self defense.” The court in this case, [District of Columbia v. Heller](#), struck down the D.C. laws banning handguns and requiring other firearms to be disassembled and unloaded or bound by a trigger lock or similar device.

“There seems to us no doubt, on the basis of both text and history, that the Second Amendment conferred an individual right to keep and bear arms,” Justice Antonin Scalia wrote for the majority.

But he added the Second Amendment right “is not unlimited.”

“Although we do not undertake an exhaustive historical analysis today of the full scope of the Second Amendment, nothing in our opinion should be taken to cast doubt on longstanding prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms,” Scalia wrote.

What was the impact of that ruling?

In a series of federal appeals since the Heller ruling, states and cities have won the right to uphold certain restrictions while losing the ability to ban firearms altogether.

These cases have been argued not only on the basis of Heller but also on [McDonald v. Chicago](#), in which the Supreme Court said in 2010 that that Second Amendment right to firearms applied not only to the federal government (the District of Columbia is a federal city) but also to cities and states. Chicago and the suburb of Oak Park had contended their restrictions effectively banning most handguns were constitutional because the Second Amendment had no application to states.

The Supreme Court disagreed in a 5-4 opinion, adding that self defense is a basic right. But the ruling, written by Justice Samuel Alito, added that the exceptions allowed in Heller — that the Second Amendment does not confer a limitless right — would also apply to states: “Despite municipal respondents’ doomsday proclamations, incorporation does not imperil every law regulating firearms.”

What were cases that followed?

The Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals cited Heller in 2013 when it [said](#) Texas had the right to disallow people under ages 18, 19 and 20 from carrying handguns in public. The Texas law balanced “Texas’s stated goal of maintaining public safety” while still allowing “18–20–year–olds to have handguns in their cars and homes and to apply for concealed handgun licenses as soon as they turn 21,” the appeals court said in [National Rifle Association v. McCraw](#).

A different court, the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, similarly used the rationale of Heller in 2014 when it said San Francisco had the right to require handguns be stored and locked when not on the person of an adult. The city’s trigger lock requirement “is substantially related to the important government interest of reducing firearm-related deaths and injuries,” the Ninth Circuit [said](#).

While this created a burden seemingly at odds with the Second Amendment, the court said, the San Francisco ordinance differed from the District of Columbia’s attempt at a broader ban because it did “not substantially prevent law-abiding citizens from using firearms to defend themselves in the home,” the court said.

What about attempts to restrict guns that fire rounds rapidly, loosely known as assault weapons?

The [Washington Post](#) reported there have been four such cases challenging states’ so-called assault weapons ban in federal appeals courts since the Supreme Court’s Heller decision. “In each case that has reached a federal appeals court since then, bans on the semiautomatic guns known as assault weapons have been upheld, usually for the same two reasons,” the Post said in late February.

“Banning them, the courts have said, does not curtail the right of self-defense protected by the Constitution. There are plenty of other weapons — handguns and regular long guns — available to people to protect themselves. At the same time, the courts have said, states and municipalities have legitimate reasons to ban AR-15-style weapons because of the dangers they pose, to schools, innocent bystanders and police.”

Sources:

Cornell Law School [Legal Information Institute](#).

[District of Columbia v. Heller](#), U.S. Supreme Court.

[National Rifle Association v. McCraw](#), Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

“Does the Second Amendment really protect assault weapons? Four courts have said no,” [Washington Post](#), Feb. 22, 2018.

[McDonald v. Chicago](#), U.S. Supreme Court, 2010

ASSAULT WEAPONS, AUTOMATIC FIREARMS AND BUMP STOCKS: SOME DEFINITIONS

by Stephen Koff, Advance Local

What an assault weapon is and isn't

“Assault weapon” is a term used somewhat loosely in the public conversation about firearms. The gun industry's traditional definition of an ‘assault rifle’ is a weapon the military generally uses and has ‘select fire capabilities,’ or the capability to switch between semi-automatic or a fully automatic mode,” [CNBC](#) reported in February.

When the federal government had an assault weapon [ban](#) from 1994 to 2004, it had a lengthy glossary of what was included, including fully automatic weapons.

But it also included semi-automatic rifles that had an ability to accept a detachable magazine — if the rifle had at least two of certain features, such as a folding or telescoping stock, or a pistol grip that protruded conspicuously beneath the action of the weapon. (The law, which has since expired, had numerous exceptions. We will provide a separate look at that federal ban and studies on how it worked).

Seven states and the District of Columbia have their own laws on assault weapons, according to the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. One of them is California, which [defines](#) an assault rifle as a semiautomatic, centerfire rifle that does not have a fixed magazine but has any one of the following:

1. A pistol grip that protrudes conspicuously beneath the action of the weapon.
2. A thumbhole stock.
3. A folding or telescoping stock.
4. A grenade launcher or flare launcher.
5. A flash suppressor.
6. A forward pistol grip.

California also includes under its assault weapons definitions a semiautomatic, centerfire rifle that has a fixed magazine with the capacity to accept more than 10 rounds, and a semiautomatic, centerfire rifle that has an overall length of less than 30 inches.

What an automatic firearm does



Master-At-Arms 3rd Class Bryon McDonald, from Greeley, Colo., fires an M240B machine gun during a live-fire exercise aboard the amphibious assault ship USS Makin Island. (U.S. Navy photo via Flickr CC By-SA 2.0)

Fully automatic weapons fire repeated rounds with the single pull of a trigger. These are also referred to as machine guns, and machine guns are illegal, expensive and hard to get in most civilian applications.

“An assault rifle is fully automatic — a machine gun. Automatic firearms have been severely restricted from civilian ownership since 1934,” says the [National Shooting Sports Federation](#), a firearms industry trade group.

What a semi-automatic firearm does

A semi-automatic fires once with each pull of the trigger, according to gun rights and sports shooting groups including the [Buckeye Firearms Association](#) in Ohio. Some automatic and semi-automatic weapons look alike, but they operate differently.

A semi-automatic firearm automatically reloads the chamber with a cartridge from a magazine after each shot and is ready to fire again, says [PolitiFact](#) and a number of sport shooting groups. This allows for rounds to be fired as rapidly as someone can pull the trigger if ammunition is in the magazine.

How rapidly a semi-automatic weapon can realistically fire

Tom Kehoe, a Florida firearms instructor and leather holster maker, wrote in a [Quora](#) post that top sporting competitors can pull the trigger “three times a second — for short periods of time. So the theoretical ‘cycling rate’ might be 180 rounds per minute, but the reality is you’re only maintaining it for bursts of a second or two.”

Rapid firing generates tremendous amounts of heat, he wrote, and most modern semi-automatic weapons use 30-round magazines, “which means the mag would have to be changed six times to reach the magic 180 number. An expert can change a mag on some rifles in about two to three seconds (depending on the gun and how he/she has staged the mags), but that’s still 12–18 seconds of lost shooting time per minute.”

That would make the maximum theoretical rate about 138 rounds per minute, he said.

How a bump stock can alter that



The semi-automatic rifle at right has been fitted with a so-called bump stock device to make it fire faster. (Associated Press photo)

A bump stock is a device that attaches to a semi-automatic weapon and uses its recoil to fire more rapidly, explains [Popular Mechanics](#). “So long as a shooter maintains forward pressure, the rifle will continue to fire at a rate much faster than could be accomplished with even the quickest possible series of manual trigger pulls.”

Phrased slightly differently: A “bump stock” replaces a rifle’s standard stock, which is the part held against the shoulder. It frees the weapon to slide back and forth rapidly, harnessing the energy from the kickback shooters feel when the weapon fires. This is from a [New York Times](#) explanation of how they work.

Bump stocks became better known to the public after they were found in a Las Vegas hotel room following the Oct. 1, 2017, shooting of outdoor concert-goers. Fifty-eight people were killed and hundreds were reported wounded.

Bump stocks are legal, with the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives giving an opinion in 2010 that since they were parts but not actual weapons, bump stocks could not be regulated under existing laws prohibiting certain firearms.

A number of groups including the National Rifle Association say that needs to change. “The NRA believes that devices designed to allow semi-automatic rifles to function like fully-automatic rifles should be subject to additional regulations,” the NRA said in a [statement](#).

President Donald Trump said in February he wanted the Justice Department to look into regulating bump stocks, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions on March 10 issued [a notice](#) of a proposed regulation “to clarify that the definition of machine gun in the National Firearms Act and Gun Control Act includes bump stock type devices, and that federal law accordingly prohibits the possession, sale, or manufacture of such devices.”

Where the AR-15 fits in



Lynnwood, Wash., gun shop owner Tiffany Teasdale-Causser holds a Ruger AR-15 semi-automatic rifle. (Associated Press photo)

The civilian AR-15, which has appeared in mass shootings including the one that killed 17 people at a Parkland, Florida, high school in February, has only semi-automatic settings. A bump stock was not used in those shootings. The “AR” part of the firearm’s name does not mean assault rifle. Rather, it stands for ArmaLite rifle, after the company that developed it in the 1950s.

The AR-15 is popular among hobbyists, with one in five firearms purchased in this country an AR-style weapon, according to National Shooting Sports Foundation figures cited by [NBC News](#). It is sleek, delivering a gratifying blast of adrenaline, and a symbol, the embodiment of core American values — freedom, might, self-reliance, NBC said after interviewing a number of gun owners.

Gun control advocates say the AR-15 has a high muzzle velocity, which, combined with the small .223 round, “produces a violent ricochet through an animal body if it hits bone,” the [Washington Post](#) reported.

But the AR-15 can be adopted for different uses and kinds of hunting. The National Shooting Sports Foundation says that because the AR-15 platform is modular, able to affix different “uppers” (barrel and chamber), its ammunition capability can include “.22, .223 (5.56 x 45mm), 6.8 SPC, .308, .450 Bushmaster and about a dozen others. Upper receivers for pistol calibers such as 9 mm, .40, and .45 are available. There are even .410 shotgun versions,” the foundation says.

AR-15-style rifles “are no more powerful than other hunting rifles of the same caliber,” the foundation says.

Sources and further reading:

[“Definition of what’s actually an 'assault weapon' is a highly contentious issue,”](#) CNBC, Feb. 21, 2018.

Text of the [Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994](#), Congress.gov.

Buckeye Firearms Association [video](#) on the difference between an automatic and semi-automatic weapons.

[“Modern Sporting Rifle Facts.”](#) National Shooting Sports Federation.

[“The difference between automatic and semi-automatic weapons.”](#) PolitiFact, Oct. 2, 2017

[“How many rounds does a semi-automatic rifle fire per minute?”](#) Quora, June 21, 2016.

[“Assault Weapons.”](#) Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

[California definitions of assault weapons](#), California Attorney General Xavier Becerra.

[“Four basic questions about the AR-15.”](#) Washington Post, Feb. 16, 2018.

[“America’s rifle: Why so many people love the AR-15.”](#) NBC News, Dec 27, 2017

[“Vegas Shooter Had 'Bump Stocks' To Give Rifles to Full-Auto Firing Rates.”](#) Popular Mechanics, Oc. 3, 2017.

[Department of Justice notice regarding bump stocks](#), March 10, 2018.

[“What is a bump stock and how does it work?”](#) New York Times, Feb. 20, 2018.

National Rifle Association [statement](#) on bump stocks.

WHAT THE ASSAULT WEAPONS BAN DID

by Stephen Koff, Advance Local

What was the Assault Weapons Ban?

It was part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, passed when President Bill Clinton was in office, that outlawed the manufacture, sale or possession of certain rapid-fire weapons. It lasted for ten years; Congress would not renew it in 2004.

Although some people characterize the bill as a ban on automatic weapons, fully automatic weapons were already largely outlawed years earlier for civilians. The ban covered semi-automatic weapons, or firearms that allow for rapid firing but require a separate pull of the trigger for each shot.

The ban covered 18 specific firearms plus numerous characteristics and features of military-style guns. Weapons made before the law went into effect could still be owned and resold.

What kinds of weapons were banned?

Specifically banned were such weapons as Kalashnikovs, UZIs, Beretta Ar70, Colt AR-15s, and INTRATEC TEC-9s, TEC-DC9s and TEC-22s, or copies or duplicates of these. But beyond named weapons, firearms with certain characteristics were also banned. A semiautomatic rifle that had an ability to accept a detachable magazine and has at least two of certain features were also banned, with those features including:

- a folding or telescoping stock;
- a pistol grip that protrudes conspicuously beneath the action of the weapon;
- a bayonet mount;
- a flash suppressor or threaded barrel designed to accommodate a flash suppressor;
- a grenade launcher.

You can find the full list under Section 110101 [here](#).

Were there exceptions or loopholes?

There were lots of them, according to a number of studies and news reports. For one, assault weapons were used in only 2 percent of gun crimes before the ban. And second, existing weapons were

grandfathered, meaning there were an estimated 1.5 million pre-ban assault weapons and 25 million to 50 million large-capacity magazines still in the U.S.

“Any semi-automatic rifle with a pistol grip and a bayonet mount was an ‘assault weapon.’ But a semiautomatic rifle with just a pistol grip might be okay,” the [Washington Post](#) reported. “It was complicated. And its complexity made it easy to evade.”

What did the ban accomplish?

The use of assault weapons in the commission of crimes dropped by 17 percent to 72 percent in cities studied — Baltimore, Miami, Milwaukee, Boston, St. Louis and Anchorage — according to a 2004 [analysis](#) for the Justice Department, the last in a series of three reports on the ban. This was largely due to a drop in the use of assault pistols, which were used more commonly than assault rifles in crime. The data showing this drop covered “all or portions of the 1995-2003 post-ban period,” the analysis said.

However, the decline was offset throughout at least the late 1990s by steady or rising use of other guns equipped with large capacity magazines, the study said. The failure to reduce large capacity magazines “has likely been due to the immense stock of exempted pre-ban magazines, which has been enhanced by recent imports,” it said.

The report concluded it was “premature to make definitive assessments of the ban’s impact on gun crime,” partly because so many pre-existing weapons were exempted.

But another factor was cited: The effects of the ban were “still unfolding and may not be fully felt for several years into the future, particularly if foreign, pre-ban large capacity magazines continue to be imported into the U.S. in large numbers.”

Was this the final word?

The ban’s success or lack thereof remains in debate, partly because of the difficulty of measuring what studies sponsored by the Justice Department set out to assess.

For one, assault weapons were used in such a small share — 2 percent — of gun crimes before the ban, [Factcheck.org](#) noted, citing the work of Christopher S. Koper, the lead author of the studies for the Justice Department and an associate professor and principal fellow at George Mason University’s Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy. “And second, existing weapons were grandfathered, meaning there were an estimated 1.5 million pre-ban assault weapons and 25 million to 50 million large-capacity magazines still in the U.S.”

The evidence was too limited for any firm projections, Koper concluded at the time, “but it does suggest that long term restrictions on these guns and magazines could potentially produce at least a small reduction in shootings.”

FactCheck.org found Koper had more to say about the potential effect of an assault weapons ban in an early 2013 presentation: “Consider, for example, at our current level of our gun violence, achieving a 1

percent reduction in fatal and non-fatal criminal shootings would prevent approximately 650 shootings annually ... And, of course having these sorts of guns, and particularly magazines, less accessible to offenders could make it more difficult for them to commit the sorts of mass shootings that we've seen in recent years.”

What else has been learned about the ban and mass shootings?

The number and rate of mass shootings depend on how mass shootings or massacres are defined, but they are definitely far lower than the rate of gun crimes overall. As of this morning (April 6, 2018), for example, [Gun Violence Archive](#), a nonprofit project that compiles extensive data on gun violence, counted 14,542 gun incidents altogether nationwide so far in 2018. But the number it counted as “mass shooting incidents,” involving four or more people shot, was substantially lower, at 58. This [is based](#) on information from police blotters, media reports and other sources.

How well did the assault weapons ban work in preventing mass shootings?

There is debate over this in part because of different definitions. There is no single definition of a mass shooting, the [Rand Corporation](#) says. A study of mass shootings involving six or more deaths said that in the decade before the ban, there were 19 such incidents, accounting for 155 deaths. During the decade-long ban, the number of incidents fell to 12 and the number of deaths from those mass shootings then came to 89. In the decade after the ban expired, the number of such incidents climbed to 34 , accounting for 203 deaths.

This is according to Louis Klarevas of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, discussing his much-publicized findings with the Washington Post. Klarevas is the author of the 2016 book "Rampage Nation: Securing America from Mass Shootings."

His data suggest that compared with the 10-year period before the ban, the number of gun massacres during the ban period fell by 37 percent, and the number of people dying from gun massacres fell by 43 percent, the [Washington Post](#) said.

After the ban expired, there was an 183 percent increase in number of massacres and a 239 percent increase in massacre deaths, Klarevas's data showed.

Is there another side to this?

The results change if the parameters of the studies — specifically, the number of victims counted to categorize a “mass shooting” and the actual firearms used — change, says Jon Stokes, founding editor of AllOutdoor.com. He made this point in a [Los Angeles Times](#) op-ed March 1.

If the number of victims counted in a “mass shooting” is reduced to four, as is common in other analyses, instead of the six counted by Klarevas, the 1994 to 2004 drop in mass-shooting fatalities — the efficacy of the assault weapons ban — disappears entirely, Stokes said.

Had Klarevas chosen a "mass shooting" threshold of five fatalities instead of six, then the dramatic pause he notes in mass shootings between 1994 to 1999 would disappear too, Stokes wrote.

For his analysis, Stokes tried to discern which ones would have been covered by the assault weapons ban and which would not. The criteria matter, he said, because a number of "mass shooting" fatalities, if defined as four people, involve single-firing pistols or other guns that were never banned.

All told, he said, there were five mass shootings that took place with "assault weapons" — as defined by the terms of the ban — in the decade before the ban, and three that took place during its tenure. "These numbers are far too small for any sort of statistical inference, especially if you're trying to build a case for banning tens of millions of legally owned rifles," Stokes wrote.

So is it settled?

The debate still rages.

In March this year, the [Rand Corporation](#) wrote: "Evidence for the effect of assault weapon bans on mass shootings is inconclusive."

Yet there also have been state-level assault weapons bans, and when factoring those in as well as the federal ban, they have been effective specifically in reducing school shootings — and other gun-control measures have not been, Mark Gius, an economics professor at Quinnipiac University, said last year in the journal [Applied Economic Letters](#).

He wrote that "assault weapons bans reduced the number of school shooting victims by 54.4 percent. All other gun control laws (concealed carry laws, private sale background checks and federal dealer background checks) had no statistically significant effects on school shootings."

This was partly noteworthy because Gius said in [previous research](#) that assault weapons bans had no significant effect on the much larger subset of state-level murder rates. Again, relatively few murders are committed using assault weapons compared with those using other guns, and Gius was specifically addressing school shootings in this analysis.

Sources and other resources:

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