The Gun Debate

By Patricia Smith

December's tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, is prompting a new look at the nation's gun laws

Gun dealers say it’s the most popular rifle in America. The AR-15 semiautomatic comes in black, tan, and camouflage, and with a wide variety of stocks, grips, sights, and barrels. It's a favorite among target shooters, hunters, and people buying guns for self-defense.

It's also the weapon used in December by 20-year-old Adam Lanza to kill 20 children and 6 adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. (Lanza also killed his mother at her home.)

The massacre--the second-worst school shooting in American history and the third mass killing with the AR-15 in five months--left an entire nation grieving and wondering how and why such tragedies happen. It also reignited a national debate over whether U.S. gun control laws need strengthening.

President Obama, who largely sidestepped the issue during his first term, has now indicated a willingness to tackle gun control, even with Democrats and Republicans generally far apart on the issue. "No single law, no set of laws can eliminate evil from the world or prevent every senseless act of violence in our society," Obama said at a memorial service for the victims in Newtown. "But that can't be an excuse for inaction."

The debate over guns in America goes back to 1791, when the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the Constitution, was adopted. Long one of the Constitution's most disputed passages, the Second Amendment reads, in its entirety: "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."

In 2008, more than 200 years after the Framers wrote the Second Amendment, the Supreme Court finally ruled on what it means: The Court said it applies to individuals, not just militias. That case, District of Columbia v. Heller, struck down a handgun ban in Washington, D.C., and established an individual's right to keep a handgun at home for self-defense. (A 2010 Supreme Court ruling, McDonald v. Chicago, applied the Heller decision, which technically affected only Washington, D.C., to all the states.)

Long History of Gun Control
The rulings do not mean that all gun-control laws are unconstitutional. In fact, gun control has a long history in the U.S. at the federal, state, and local levels. The nation has often stiffened gun laws following notorious shootings. After the 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, Congress passed the Gun Control Act of 1968, which prohibited mail-order sales of rifles and shotguns and banned felons and drug users from owning guns.

The 1994 Brady law, spurred in part by the 1981 assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan, created a national system of background checks for gun purchases.* Also in 1994, Congress passed a 10-year ban on assault weapons that covered 18 specific semiautomatic guns, including some versions of the AR--15, and high-capacity clips. The ban expired in 2004 because there weren't enough votes in Congress to extend it.

The AR--15 rifle that was used in the Newtown shooting is the civilian version of the military's M-16 and M-4 rifles. It's been used repeatedly in recent mass shootings: the killing of 12 people in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, in July, and the killing of two people in a Portland, Oregon, shopping mall in early December.

The semiautomatic rifle Lanza used belonged to his mother, a gun enthusiast who kept a collection of guns in her home. It was legally purchased and registered in Connecticut.

Gun-rights groups--the most powerful of which is the National Rifle Association--have long argued that restrictions on gun ownership infringe on the rights of law-abiding citizens and make it harder for them to protect themselves against criminals. The vast majority of gun owners, the N.R.A. says, use firearms responsibly.

"Guns are why we're free in this country, and people lose sight of that when tragedies like this happen," says Scott Ostrosky, who owns a gun range in Newtown. "A gun didn't kill all those children. A disturbed man killed all those children."

But gun control advocates say the recent shootings prove that the nation's gun laws are too weak.

"I think this tragedy exposes our gun laws for what they are: wildly inadequate and utterly insane," says Ladd Everitt of the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence. "We've allowed this kind of carnage to happen through our inaction."

Democrats say they will push to renew the assault-weapons ban and try to ban high-capacity clips. The Justice Department may also revive plans to expand the background-check system.

Until the shooting in Newtown, the trend seemed to be heading in the opposite direction. The day before, lawmakers in Michigan had passed a bill that would allow people to carry concealed weapons in schools, and Ohio lawmakers had passed a bill that would allow guns in cars in the statehouse garage. Whether the national horror over the Newtown shooting translates into a change in policy remains to be seen. But some Washington insiders are hopeful that the tragedy may temper the partisanship that has plagued Congress recently.

"Members of Congress, when you get down to it, are just people," says Mickey Edwards, a former House Republican leader. "There are those things that, at least momentarily, trump ideology."

*With reporting by Erica Goode, Michael Moss, Ray Rivera, and Jackie Calmes of The Times.

**Critical Thinking**

Last month's shooting at a Connecticut elementary school has prompted some Americans to call for tougher gun laws. But not everyone agrees that's the solution.

- Why do you think the U.S. sees so many incidents of gun violence? What factors do you think contribute to the problem?
- What do you think can be done to stem gun violence?
- In your opinion, do U.S. gun-control laws need to be strengthened? Why or why not? If so, what kind of legislation do you think is needed?

**Writing Prompt**
Write a speech to Congress for or against reinstituting the federal ban on assault weapons that expired in 1994. Support your position with facts from the article.

**Debate**

Take a stand: Should school staff be allowed to carry concealed weapons?

**Discussion Questions**

Why do you think Americans disagree so much about gun control?
Why do you think it took the Supreme Court 200 years to clarify the meaning of the Second Amendment? Do you agree or disagree with the Court's interpretation?
Why did the Framers write the Second Amendment? What was life like in the nation in the late 18th century?
Did the Connecticut shooting make you think differently about gun control—or reinforce your stance? Explain.
Who should be allowed to own and carry firearms? What kind of guns should be available? Explain your position.
Who does the National Rifle Association represent? What is its position on gun control?

**Fast Fact**

The U.S. has a firearm murder rate of 2.97 for every 100,000 people. That means there are about three gun murders annually for every 100,000 people.

**Gun Homicides**

Last month's tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut reignited the national debate over gun control (see article, p. 6). With 88 guns for every 100 people, the U.S. has the highest rate of gun ownership in the world. It's also among the top nations in annual gun homicides—though it trails far behind the leader in that category, Brazil.

**Analyze the Graph**

1. How many nations had more than 10,000 gun homicides in 2010?
   a two
   b three
   c four
   d six
2. Most of the nations listed on this graph are in ____.
   a South America and Asia
   b North America and South America
   c North America and Africa
   d South America and Europe
3. Together, the two Asian nations listed on the bar graph had about ____ gun homicides in 2010.
   a 10,000
   b 13,000
   c 16,000
   d 19,000
4. The Philippines had about three times as many gun homicides as ____.

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5. About 68 percent of all U.S. homicides in 2010 were committed with guns. You can infer from the graph that the U.S. had ____ total homicides that year.
   a fewer than 12,000
   b almost 15,000
   c about 18,000
   d about 20,000

Discussion Questions

1. If this graph included only developed nations, the U.S. would rank first in the number of gun murders. Does this statistic surprise you? Why or why not? How might you explain it?

2. Some nations, like Finland and Switzerland, have high rates of gun ownership but relatively low rates of gun violence. Why do you think that is so?

3. The U.S. has the third-highest population in the world. How do you think this affects its position on this graph? How do you think the graph might be different if it measured gun homicides per capita (per person)?

4. How might a gun-rights group interpret this graph? How might a gun-control group interpret it?

Quiz

1. The nation's ongoing debate over gun control is rooted in the Constitution's
   a Preamble.
   b First Amendment.
   c Second Amendment.
   d Fourth Amendment.

2. In District of Columbia v. Heller, the U.S. Supreme Court
   a affirmed an individual's right to keep a handgun at home for self-protection.
   b established that only militia groups are entitled to bear firearms.
   c upheld a handgun ban in Washington, D.C.
   d overturned all federal gun-control measures.

3. The Gun Control Act of 1968, passed in response to the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and senator Robert F. Kennedy,
   a prohibited mail-order sales of rifles.
   b banned felons from owning firearms.
   c banned drug users from owning firearms.
   d all of the above

4. The ____ created a national system of background checks for gun purchases.
   a District of Columbia v. Heller ruling
   b McDonald v. Chicago ruling
   c Reagan Act
   d Brady law

5. Congress's 1994 ban on assault weapons
   a was overturned by the Supreme Court.
   b expired in 2004 because there were not enough votes to extend it.
c was repealed shortly after it was passed.
d was strengthened in 2009 with the addition of several specific types of semiautomatic rifles.
6 The gun used in the Newtown, Connecticut, school shooting was
a a stolen handgun.
b an unregistered single-shot hunting rifle.
c a legally registered semiautomatic rifle.
d a 150-year-old pistol from an antiques collection.

In-Depth Questions
1 Before the mass shooting in Connecticut, do you think the U.S. was moving toward looser or stricter gun laws? Explain.
2 What arguments do gun-rights groups make in opposition to gun-control legislation?
3 Do you think the nation's existing gun laws are adequate? Explain.

Photo Analysis
1 This note was left at a Newtown, Connecticut, memorial. What plea does the writer make? Do you think the request can be fulfilled? Explain.
2 What do you think are the main causes of gun violence?
3 What makes this photo compelling?

Essay
What is your own message to President Obama in the wake of the Newtown tragedy? What actions, if any, would you like him and lawmakers to take? Explain.

Answer Key

Graph Exercise
1. [c] four
2. [b] North America and South America
3. [a] 10,000
4. [d] El Salvador
5. [b] almost 15,000

Quiz
1. [c] Second Amendment
2. [a] affirmed an individual's right to keep a handgun at home for self-protection.
3. [d] all of the above
4. [d] Brady law
5. [b] expired in 2004 because there were not enough votes to extend it
6. [c] a legally registered semiautomatic rifle.

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