

## **The Gun Debate: A school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, is prompting a new look at the nation's gun laws.** *by Patricia Smith and Brooke Ross*

On December 14, 20-year-old Adam Lanza broke into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. He killed 20 children and 6 adults with an assault rifle. (Lanza had already killed his mother at their home.)

The massacre left the entire nation grieving and wondering how such a tragedy could have happened. It also reignited the debate over whether the United States needs tougher gun-control laws.

President Barack Obama did not focus on gun control during his first term. But now he says he is determined to tackle the issue, even with Democrats and Republicans generally far apart on what to do about gun violence. Days after the Newtown shooting, Obama appointed vice President Joe Biden to lead a **task force** to find ways to prevent more mass shooting.

Obama says he is prepared to do everything in his power as president to stop gun violence in the United State. "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 in Newtown at a memorial service for the victims. "But that can't be an excuse for inaction."

### **Gun Control History**

The gun debate in the U.S. dates back to the 18th century, when the nation's founders were crafting the Bill of Rights - the first 10 amendments to the Constitution, adopted in 1791. The Second Amendment gave Americans the right to "bear arms." However, for more than 200 years, people have disagreed over how to interpret the amendment [see sidebar].

The Supreme Court has ruled that individuals do have the right to own guns in certain situations. However, that does not mean that all gun-control laws have been ruled unconstitutional. Gun control has a long history in the U.S. at the federal, state, and local levels. The nation has often strengthened gun laws following widely publicized shootings. After the 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, Congress passed the Gun Control Act of 1968. It prohibited mail-order sales of rifles and shotguns. It also barred people convicted of serious crimes and drug possession from owning guns.

The 1994 **Brady Law**, spurred in part by a 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. Those are weapons capable of firing multiple bullets quickly. The ban covered 18 semi-automatic guns, including some version of the AR-15 rifle. (That was the gun that Lanza used in the Newtown shooting.) The ban expired in 2004, however, because there weren't enough votes in Congress to extend it.

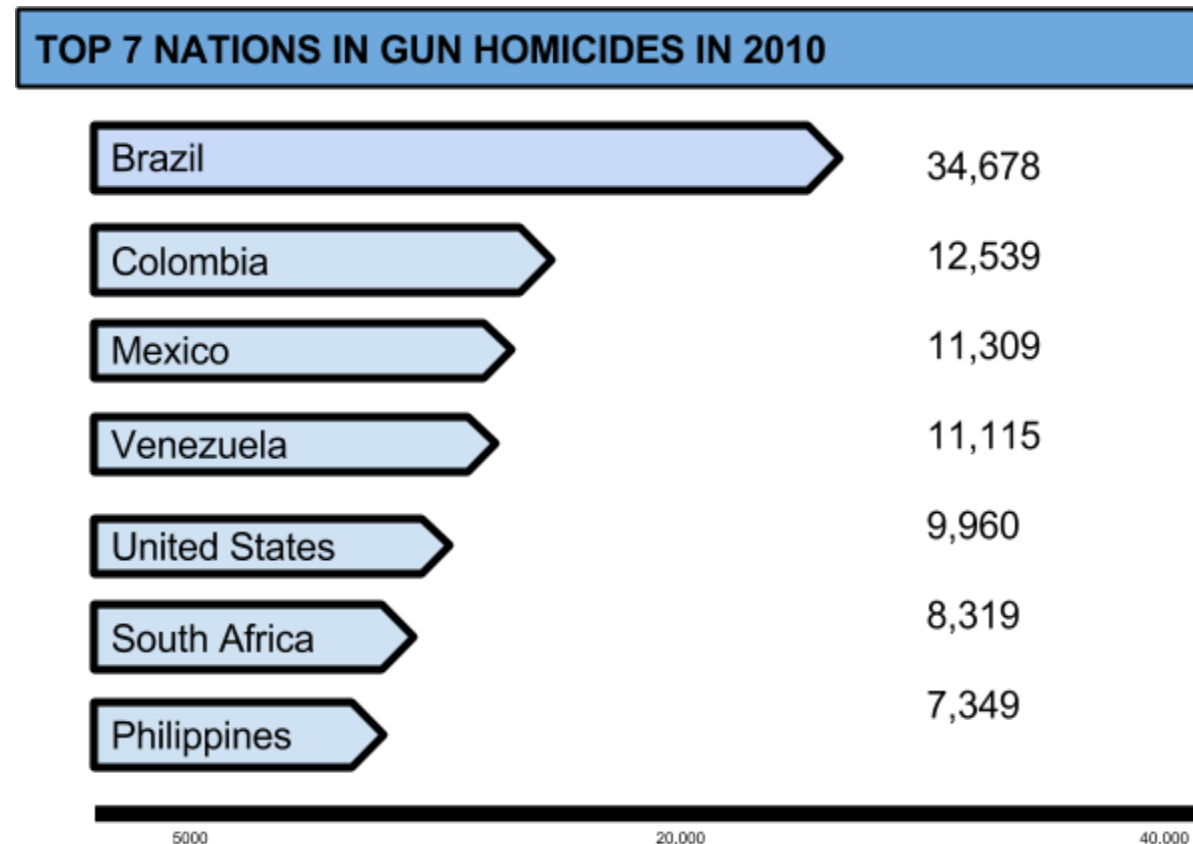
- **task force** (n): a temporary group set up to accomplish a specific goal
- **civilian** (adj): nonmilitary
- **infringe** (v): to limit or interfere with someone's rights

**Brady Law:** The law was named for James Brady, Reagan's press secretary, who was seriously wounded in the assassination attempt and founded the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence to push for tougher gun-control laws.

### The Debate Today

The AR-15 rifle that was used in the Newtown shooting is the **civilian** version of two military rifles. It's been the weapon of choice in several recent mass shootings. It was used to kill 12 people in a movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado, in July 2012. It also was the weapon used to kill two people in a Portland, Oregon, shopping mall last December.

The rifle that Lanza fired belonged to his mother. She was a gun enthusiast who kept a collection of guns in her home. The weapon had been legally purchased and registered in Connecticut.



Gun-rights groups, including the National Rifle Association (NRA), have long argued that restricting gun ownership infringes on people's rights and makes it harder for them to protect themselves.

At a press conference after the Newtown shooting, Wayne LaPierre, the NRA's vice-president, said that tougher gun laws would not prevent similar shootings. Instead, he proposed a national program to have an armed security guard in every school. "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun," LaPierre said.

People in favor of stricter gun control say the recent shootings prove that the nation's laws are too weak. Ladd Everitt of the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence says the laws fail to protect Americans.

"We've allowed this kind of [killing] to happen through our inaction," he says.

After hearing Biden's recommendations, Obama unveiled new policies to limit gun violence. Some of the proposals include banning military-style assault weapons and limiting ammunition in some cases. The president also signed several executive actions to strengthen existing gun laws.

Until Newtown, the issue of gun control seemed to be heading in a different direction. The day before the shooting, Lawmakers in Michigan passed a bill allowing people to carry concealed weapons in certain public places. However, Michigan's governor vetoed the bill. In Ohio, lawmakers passed a bill permitting guns in cars in the statehouse garage.

How the nation's grief over the Newtown shooting will continue to affect gun control is unclear. But some people in Washington hope that the tragedy will ease the divide between Democrats and Republicans.

"The American people are going to be sharing in the grief of Connecticut families and will have little patience for political games and finger-pointing," says Steve Elmendorf. He is a longtime adviser to Democrats in Congress. "I suspect both sides realize that they should tone down the fighting and move to a deal."

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# 3 Questions About the 2nd Amendment:

“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.”

<p><b>1</b> <b>What were the nation’s founders thinking when they wrote the Second Amendment?</b></p> <p>It’s hard to say because the wording is unclear. In fact, the Second Amendment [above] is one of the most disputed passages in the U.S. Constitution.</p> <p>Americans have long debated whether the Second Amendment refers to individuals or to militia members. (A militia is a citizen army.) Those in favor of greater access to guns believe that the phrase “the right to bear Arms” gives citizens a constitutional right to possess guns.</p> <p>Supporters of gun control say the opening words, “A well regulated Militia,” indicate that the nation’s founders meant to protect only the right of states to maintain citizen armies.</p>	<p><b>2</b> <b>What are the origins of the Second Amendment?</b></p> <p>It’s no surprise that the Founding Fathers believed that the right to bear arms was important. The concept dates back to 17th-century England. The English Bill of Rights, which was passed in 1689, outlines people’s right to defend themselves.</p> <p>During early American history, people kept muskets for militia service. (A musket is a long-barreled gun used before the invention of the rifle.) Men were often required to serve in their local militias. Militia members defended their communities against Native American raid and acted as a police force when needed.</p>	<p><b>3</b> <b>What has the Supreme Court said about the Second Amendment?</b></p> <p>In 2008, the Supreme Court finally ruled on what the Second Amendment means: The Court said it applies to individuals, not just militias. In the case of <i>District of Columbia v. Heller</i>, the Court struck down a handgun ban in Washington, D.C., and established an individual’s right to keep a handgun at home for self-defense.</p> <p>The case stemmed from a man who had challenged a law that banned D.C. residents from keeping handguns in their homes. The man, Dick Heller, said he wanted to be able to defend himself.</p> <p>In a 2010 case, <i>McDonald v. Chicago</i>, the Court applied the <i>Heller</i> decision, which technically affected only Washington, D.C., to all the states. In the <i>McDonald</i> case, Otis McDonald and three other Chicago residents had filed a lawsuit challenging the city’s handgun ban.</p>
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