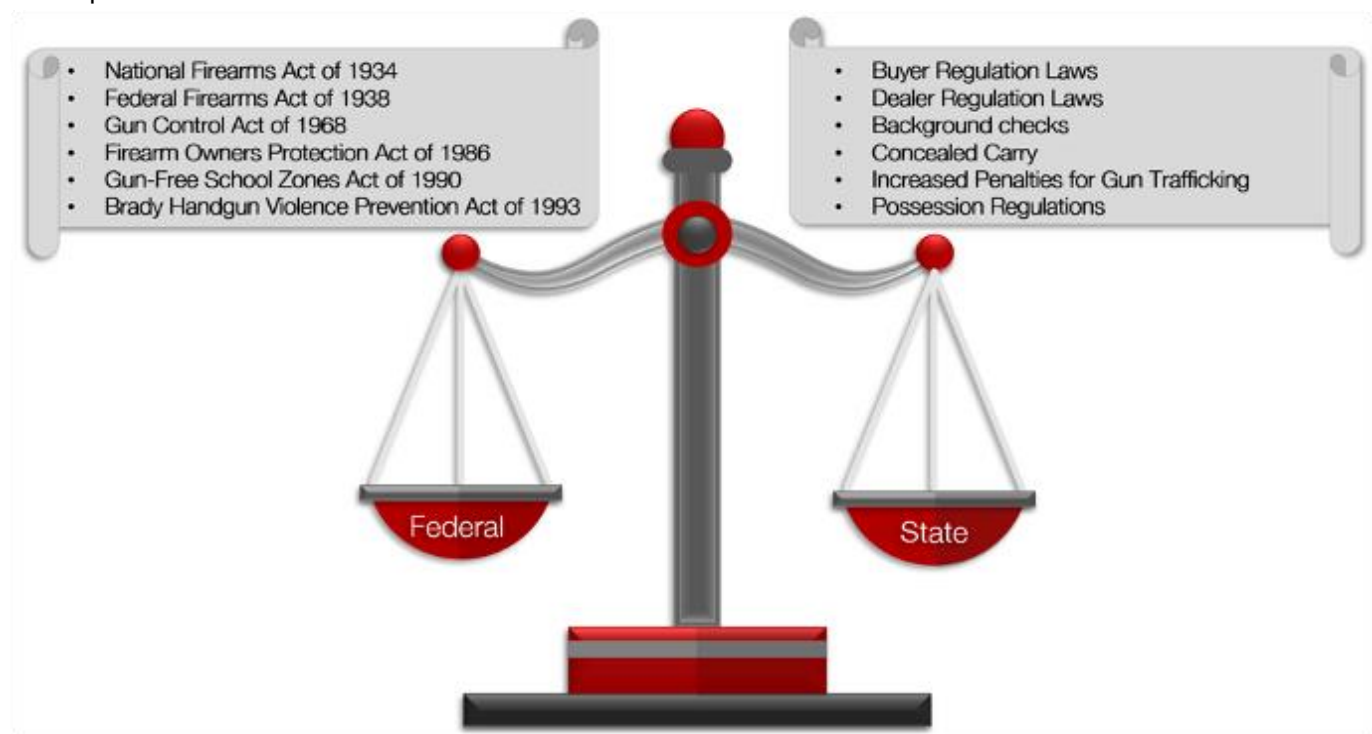


The Gun Control Debate and Public Opinion

By Leobardo Lopez, Tanya Dudinskaya, and Christopher Forepaugh

The controversial nature of the gun control debate has led to a legislative balancing act between the protection of individual freedoms and the interest of public safety. The U.S. Supreme Court has placed restrictions on gun ownership dating back to the *Gun Control Act of 1968*¹. This prohibited people under 18 years of age, convicted criminals, the mentally disabled, and others from purchasing a gun. Similarly, the *Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act of 1993* increased restrictions by instituting mandatory background checks for people purchasing a firearm². At the state level, firearm legislation varies but ultimately revolves around the restrictions placed by these federal acts. For example, in Nevada, background checks are required for all firearm sales and a CCW permit is needed to carry a concealed weapon. Aside from firearm restrictions, the Nevada Revised Statutes (NRS) also increase criminal sanctions for using a firearm in the commission of a crime and prohibit possessing a firearm as a felon. Overall, gun laws regulate the manufacture, trade, possession, and transfer of firearms. Figure 1 highlights major gun laws passed at the federal level and types of gun laws passed at the state level.



The development and implementation of policies is in part driven by public concern and opinion. Hence, it is critical to examine public support for gun-related policies. This Policy Brief examines public perceptions about gun restrictions and increased criminal penalties for crimes committed with firearms. It compares these public attitudes among samples of Nevada and US residents, identifies sources of variation in these views, and summarizes the arguments that underlie these alternative views about gun control policy and practice.

TRENDS IN PUBLIC ATTITUDES: GUN POLICIES

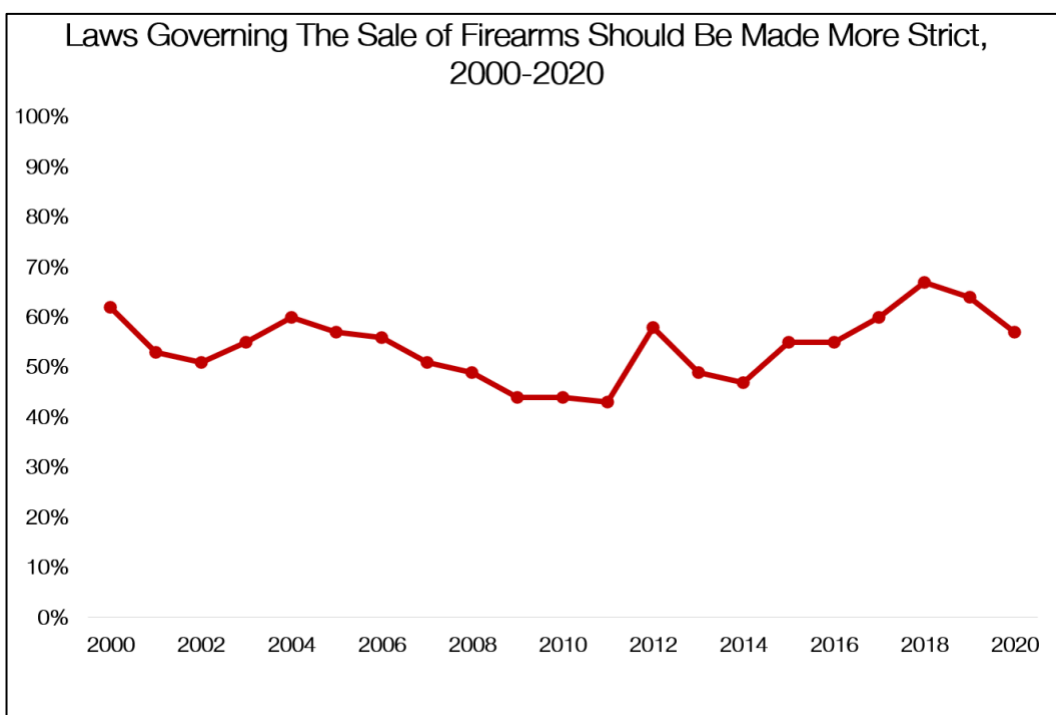
Trends in public opinion surrounding gun laws have been documented by various agencies. Most notably, Gallup has conducted several surveys examining gun-related

issues. For the past two decades, the majority of surveyed

Americans believe that laws governing the sale of firearms should be made more strict (See Figure 2)³. More recently, public opinion surveys indicate that about one-third of

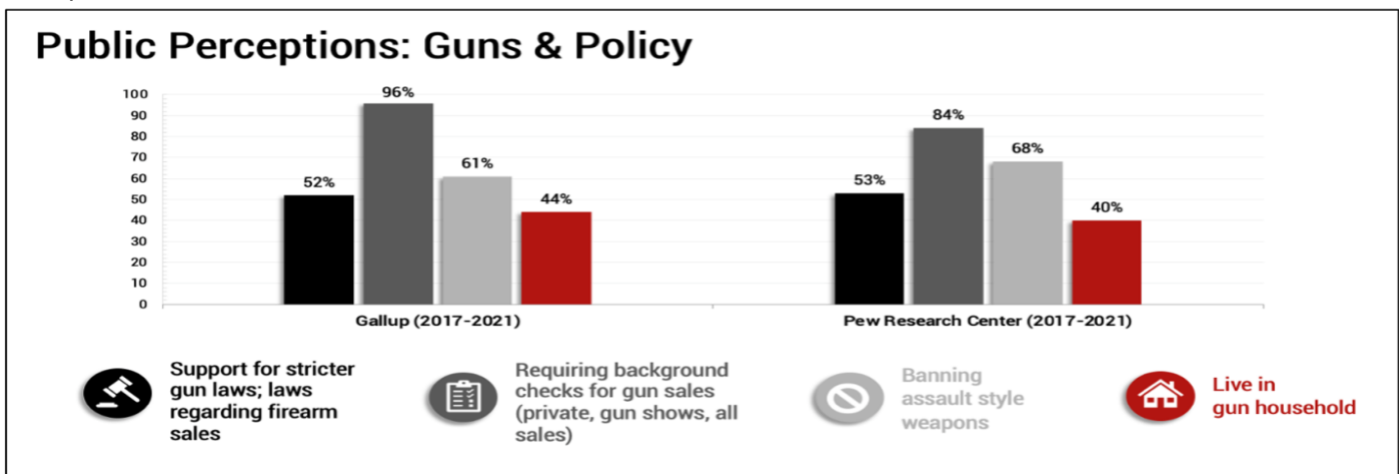
Americans are very

dissatisfied with the nation's laws or policies on guns³. About 48% of Americans believe that gun violence is a very big problem⁴.



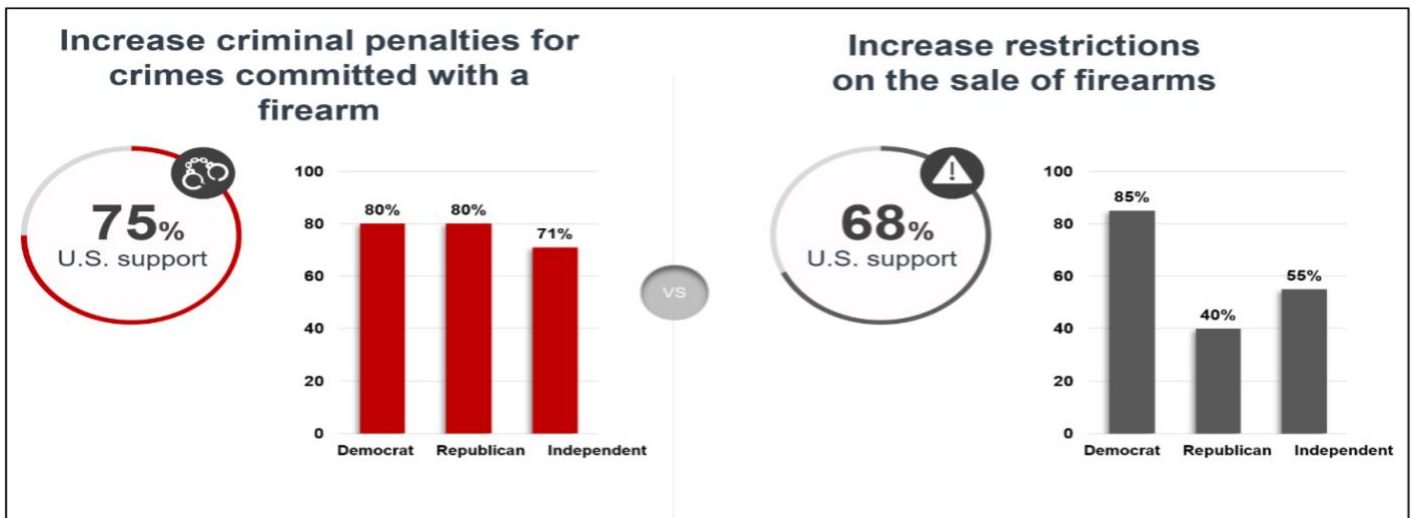
These surveys also find that perceptions about gun violence differ across race, ethnicity, and political party. In 2021, about 82% of Black adults, 58% of Hispanic adults, and 39% of White adults believe that gun violence is a very big problem⁴. Regarding political parties, about 73% of Democrats and Democrat-leaning independents believe that gun violence is a very big problem, while only about 18% of Republicans believe this is the case⁴.

There are a variety of issues to consider when discussing public perceptions of guns and related policies. Figure 3 shows differences in gun ownership and public support for stricter laws on firearm sales, background checks, and banning assault weapons. Overall, a sizeable minority of U.S. citizens (over 40%) live in gun-owning households⁵. Regarding public opinion on gun laws, previous surveys show the following trends: (1) slightly over half of the public supports stricter gun laws, (2) the majority support background checks for all gun purchases (including private sales and at gun shows), and (3) over 60% support banning the manufacture, possession, and sale of assault style weapons⁶.



In relation to the specific areas that would constitute stricter gun laws, an overwhelming majority of Americans believe that laws should prevent the mentally ill from owning guns (89%), laws should prohibit gun purchases by those on no-fly list or on watchlists (83%), and only 36% of the public believes that there should be shorter waiting periods for buying guns legally⁷.

Overall, there is a consistent story to be told about the nation’s political divide in opinions regarding stricter laws of firearm sales. The results of a recent survey conducted by the CCJP (2021) reveals the continuous differences of opinion between U.S. Republicans and Democrats in terms of their support for increased restrictions of firearms sales. The clear majority (85%) of Democrats favored increased restrictions compared to only 40% of Republicans. These percentages are similar to Democrats (83%) and Republicans (31%) residing in Nevada. The overall national level of public support for increased restrictions on gun sales was 68% (Figure 4).



The significant differences in opinion concerning whether there should be increased restrictions on firearm sales (and stricter gun laws overall) based on political orientation is also consistent across multiple survey samples such as from Gallup and Pew Research Center. Gallup’s survey revealed that 91% of Democrats favored stricter gun laws compared to only about a fourth of Republicans⁸. Similarly, the Pew Research Center found 81% of Democrats favor stricter gun laws, while only 20% of Republicans support these policies⁴. Where both sides of the political spectrum seem to be in congruence is regarding the matter of increasing criminal penalties for crimes committed with a firearm. For example, the CCJP’s (2021) survey yielded similar levels of support (80%-87%) from Republicans and Democrats for harsher criminal penalties.

POLICY DEBATE

Much of the divide surrounding gun control stems from a dichotomy between the protection of individual freedoms and public safety. On the one hand, opponents of gun control regard these laws as an overreach of their constitutional rights. However, proponents of gun control contend that gun violence is a major public health concern and should be addressed with strict legislation. Highlighting this divergence are conflicting beliefs regarding the consequences of restricting gun ownership. Proponents of this type of legislation contend that it will reduce gun violence, while opponents argue that gun ownership deters crime. The following graphic highlights this and other major sources of disagreement about gun control.



The Second Amendment provides for the right of an armed militia, not private citizens.

1

The Second Amendment provides the right of the people to bear arms.

The Second Amendment

Criminals use guns because they are so easily obtainable. Fewer guns would make violence harder to commit.

2

Gun control punishes ordinary citizens for the actions of violent criminals. Be tougher on criminals instead of law-abiding citizens.

“Guns Don’t Kill People”

Countries with strict gun control have lower murder rates.

3

There is insufficient evidence that gun control laws reduce violence. Some of the strongest gun control laws in the U.S. are in cities that still have serious violence.

Gun Control Laws Reduce Violence

Criminals who illegally obtain firearms will be charged with possession and face stiffer penalties.

4

Criminals do not obey the law, so gun control laws will not stop criminals from obtaining guns.

“When Guns are Outlawed, Only Outlaws Will Have Guns”

Guns are more likely to harm members of the home than protect them.

5

Gun control laws make it more difficult for citizens to protect themselves and their families when the police are not around.

Self-Defense

Deterrence is hard to measure in the real world and presumes that offenders are forward thinking enough to be deterred.

6

The presence of an armed citizenry deters potential criminals.

Deterrence

CONCLUSION

A key factor for policy implementation is public concern towards an issue and support for legislative change. For gun-related policies, approximately, 48% of Americans perceive gun violence as a big problem and just over 50% favor stricter gun laws⁴.

Aside from public opinion, research disentangling the relationship between gun control laws and gun violence is muddy at best. Some studies show a decline in gun violence when gun control laws are implemented⁹. However, much of this research is only correlational. In contrast, some researchers have argued that armed citizens provide a deterrent effect on crime¹⁰. In other words, restrictive gun control policies diminish this deterrent effect and foster an increase in crime. While a compelling argument, some have noted that a deterrent effect of this nature is difficult to accurately measure.

The political nature of the gun control debate often stifles the development and implementation of informed, effective policies. A more balanced approach is needed to carefully assess the evidence surrounding policy effectiveness. Thus, the implementation of gun-related policies requires extensive research and development that involves an examination of past and current policies and their impacts. However, for this policy brief, an examination of public perceptions and attitudes on gun-related policies is a great avenue to begin exploring this issue.

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End Notes

¹ ATF, 2020.

² ATF, 2021.

³ Gallup, 2021.

⁴ Pew Research Center, 2021.

⁵ Pew Research Center, 2017; Saad, 2020; Gallup, 2021.

⁶ Pew Research Center, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2021; Gallup, 2021.

⁷ Pew Research Center, 2017.

⁸ Brennan, 2021.

⁹ Sen & Panjamapirom, 2012; Kalesan, et al., 2016; Kivisto, Ray, & Phalen, 2017.

¹⁰ Kleck & Gertz, 1995; Lott, 1998.

Center for Crime and Justice Policy

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