



## **More than 30,000 People Die from Gunshots Wounds Each Year in the United States**

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Tuesday morning, September 28, gunshots were heard on the campus of the University of Texas. A 19-year-old student had burst onto campus with an AK-47 and was headed to the main building. Another student saw him and cried out to others. “There’s a guy with a machine gun. Hit the ground!” Minutes later, the boy with the gun went into the library and took his own life.

He is one of 30,000 US-Americans who die each year from gunshot wounds according to the Violence Policy Center (VPC). The last Injury Mortality Reports from the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control show that in 2007, 12,632 people were killed with firearms and 17,352 committed suicide using firearms.

It is increasingly common to see assault weapons being used in killings. Typically they are AK-47s and other weapons manufactured in Eastern Europe. The brands purchased most often in the United States are the WASR and the Saiga, which are available on the U.S. market in spite of the fact that the 1968 Gun Control Act bans the importation of assault weapons and only permits the importation of guns for “sporting purposes.” According to Violence Policy Center (VPC) analysts Kristen Rand and Tom Díaz, the companies that manufacture these weapons make some changes in the appearance of the guns so that they can enter the United States as guns used for sport.

“Is that right? That many Americans die from gunshot wounds every year?” asked an incredulous Democratic congressional aide. This particular aide works for a legislator who is trying to pass laws to make it more difficult to purchase assault weapons. He was not aware of the statistics from the Injury Mortality Report.

I asked the aide whether he thought that lawmakers, Democrats and Republicans, were aware of other such statistics: that 28,000 Mexicans have been killed in the last three and half years in clashes between drug traffickers and security forces (including civilians caught in crossfire, policemen, soldiers, and drug traffickers); and that 90% of the assault weapons or pistols used by drug traffickers in these confrontations were purchased in the United States, according to official statistics from the Mexican government.

He said, “I think there is an awareness, but I think it is sort of an awareness that turns on and turns off. It turns on when there is something huge that happens in the news and you hear about terrible things like ... when 72 Central American immigrants were killed in...Tamaulipas, Mexico [last August]... but then it turns off. It sort of goes back and forth.”

VPC Legal Director, Kristen Rand, had the following to say about violence in Mexico: “I don’t think the American public has a real understanding of what is going on in Mexico. There was a

flurry of press attention, and I know there is coverage in the US press near the border areas, but generally the American public is not aware of the role the gun industry plays in that. And then you have the NRA who would basically lie and say that it's not US weapons. They spend a lot of time doing that."

In the August edition of the NRA magazine *Rifle Man*, Chris Cox, Executive Director for NRA-ILA, said that "The Mexican drug cartels that are responsible for much of Mexico's violent crime problem have military grade weapons and explosives that they cannot get in the United States."

One Democratic congressional aide who asked to remain anonymous commented in an interview that when two US consulate workers were murdered in Ciudad Juarez last March, he and other colleagues were hoping that US authorities would pay more attention to the lax laws for purchasing guns in the United States. But nothing happened.

All over the United States, except in California, it is legal to buy and sell assault weapons. Furthermore, federal law does not establish a maximum number of guns that can be purchased. The drug cartels take advantage of this situation to supply themselves with weapons. They hire straw purchasers—young Americans who buy weapons in small numbers—and pay them \$150-\$300 per gun purchased.

"That is the thing I just can't understand. On September 11, 2001, three thousand people died. And ten times that amount of people die every year in the United States from firearms. That question comes into my head a lot. Believe me." said VPC arms trafficking expert Tom Díaz.

Bills to restrict the sale of assault weapons and require a criminal background check for anyone who buys a gun at a gun show have not advanced in Congress. Meanwhile, in the book *Gun Violence: The Real Cost* by Philip Cook and Jens Ludwig, the authors explain that direct and indirect costs of violence such as medical costs, lost wages, and security expenditures, cost the United States 100 billion dollars a year.

"We have done lots of stuff for automobile safety, motor vehicle safety. We have done it for air safety. And when you talk about weapons it's a public health issue. It's not just historical or ideological. It's a public health issue. And the gun industry is the only one that hasn't gone through a Congressional review," said Díaz.

The last time US legislators approved a significant gun law was in 1968. And three tragedies had to happen for that to occur. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated with an assault rifle that had been purchased by mail order. A few months later, Martin Luther King was murdered.

These homicides had ripple effects all the way to Congress, where they began to discuss a law to prohibit the purchase and shipment of arms via mail order. At the time, the National Rifle Association (NRA), founded in 1871, fiercely defended the Second Amendment of the US Constitution, which establishes the right to bear arms.

In 1968, the debate was at an impasse. But then the third chilling event took place. Robert Kennedy, the brother of the former president, was shot in the middle of his presidential campaign. The moment of action arrived, and the Gun Control Act was passed that year.

That law prohibited the purchase of weapons by mail order, by minors, by the mentally ill, and by people with criminal backgrounds. It also banned the import of assault weapons.

The Obama administration is not enforcing the 1968 ban on assault rifle imports, however. Russian and Rumanian factories that produce AK-47s have made some cosmetic changes on their machine guns so that they can pass for recreational guns, and thus disguised, they come into the country classified as guns for “sporting purposes.”

The President of the United States has the authority to issue regulations relating to the 1968 Gun Control Act. He could specify, for example, that AK-47s and AR-15s—semi-automatic assault weapons—are not guns for sport and that, therefore, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) must stop their entry into the United States. But he has not done so. Some of his predecessors did do something.

“In the 1980s the country was shocked by violence in the south. In Miami, police and federal agents were being killed. It was everywhere. There was a huge war over crack and cocaine. Then the head of the Office of Narcotics went to the president and said, ‘this is madness, we have to stop assault weapons’ and at that time most of them were coming from abroad. So at that time, ATF was in the Treasury Department, so the Secretary of Treasury just told ATF ‘look we need rules for this’ and they did it,” said Díaz.

The current administration has not shown the same determination to stop the entry of Eastern European assault weapons, many of which do not stay in the U.S. territory, but are acquired by arms dealers who sell them to Mexican drug traffickers. President Obama summarized everything his government has done on this issue in a single sentence during the visit of Mexican President Felipe Calderón last May 19:

“We’re working to stem the southbound flow of American guns and money, which is why, for the first time, we are now screening 100 percent of southbound rail cargo. And guided by our new National Drug Control Strategy, we’re bringing new approaches to reducing the demand for drugs in our country.”

### ***California Isolated***

Researchers, activists, and lawmakers point to California as an example of what should be done on a federal level. In 1989, California passed the Roberti-Roos Assault Weapons Control Act which was reformed in 1999. It prohibits the buying and selling of any kind of semi-automatic weapon, grenade-launcher, assault rifle, and some types of pistols. According to Sacramento ATF agent Graham Barlowe, however, many traffickers who work for the cartels go to Nevada to buy guns and then bring them into California.

### ***Lack of Awareness***

“In general, people are not aware of gun violence until it affects them directly. When they lose someone, they get involved,” explained another Democratic congressional aide who also

reported that people often come to their office who have lost a relative and ask what can be done to change the situation.

The lack of awareness among youth who are recruited to buy small quantities of weapons for Mexican drug dealers is also a problem. “For them, it’s no big deal to go there and fill an ATF 4473 form to buy a weapon. They don’t think about long term effects or how they are helping criminals,” said Armando Salas, ATF agent in Houston.