

How Did America Become A Country Where the Leading Cause of Death for Children is a Bullet in Their Body?

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In 1954, when I was 12 years old, I was given a .22 caliber rifle for my birthday by my father an anesthesiologist who had been the commanding officer of a combat hospital in World War II, in what was called the CBI (China, Burma, India) Theater. I mention this to make the point that my father was all too aware of what guns did to the human body, and he had no interest in guns. There was nothing unusual about this. Many of my friends got the same gift from their fathers who were almost all vets. It was quite common.

I had become a Boy Scout the year before, again nothing unusual, and the Scouts had an NRA approved training course on gun safety. At the time that's what the NRA did, train people, particularly boys, in gun safety. There was nothing political about this. In 1954, according to the then Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, there were a total of 4,115 deaths resulting from "assault by firearms and explosives."¹ It was about 6 such deaths per 100,000 of population, a small fraction of the deaths caused by "motor vehicle collisions," and it was pretty much the same rate it had been in 1950, or would be in 1958.² It never occurred to me to shoot

someone, and it obviously did not occur to many others either.

GUN VIOLENCE ARCHIVE 2023		
Evidence Based Research - since 2013		
PUBLISHED DATE: April 12, 2023		
Total Number of GV Deaths - ALL Causes ⁴		11,744
Homicide/Murder/Unintentional/DGU ¹		5,012
Suicide ³		6,732
Total Number of Injuries ¹		8,986
Mass Shootings ²		147
Mass Murders ²		14
Number of Children (age 0-11) ¹	Killed	73
	Injured	162
Number of Teens (age 12-17) ¹	Killed	407
	Injured	984

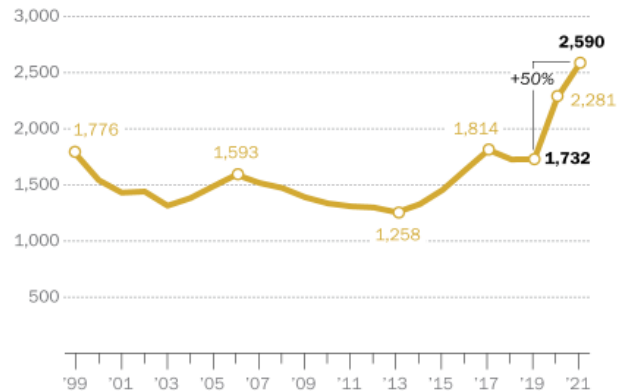
Illustration One

How did we get from that to where we are on 12 April 2023, as I write this? As to today there have been 147 mass shootings in 102 days and almost 12,000 people are dead from gun violence? (*See Illustration one*) And I am sure by the time you read this the number of deaths will be significantly higher. Probably higher than the devastation of 2022, which saw 44,340 gun violence deaths and was the worst year in our history as a country, absent the Civil War which was an open war. Not the random guerilla warfare of

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Gun deaths among U.S. kids increased 50% between 2019 and 2021

Gun deaths among U.S. children and teens under 18



Note: Includes homicides, suicides, accidents and all other categories of gun deaths.
Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Illustration Two

As the U.S. Department of Justice reported in 1984, “A description of the background and development of the NRA notes NRA support for moderate measures of gun control in the 1950's and the 1960's; however, in the 1970's, the NRA began to notice that legislation which it had earlier supported had failed to curb crime or impair criminal access to firearms, while it was adversely affecting the firearms freedoms of the law-abiding citizen. In 1977, after a purge of the leadership by the life members, the NRA Board of Directors officially agreed to oppose increasingly restrictive gun legislation. The NRA established a lobbying arm in 1975, with the formation, at the behest of the membership, of the Institute for Legislative Action, followed in 1976 by the formation of a political action committee, the NRA Political Victory Fund. The Firearms Civil Rights Legal Defense Fund was formed in 1979.”³

The transformation that occurred as the NRA transitioned from a gun safety training organization to a lobbying organization for the corporate weapons merchants, and began to use the vast funding the industry made available to them, also transformed the Republican Party. With the 21 January 2010 Supreme Court decision on *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, the court held “that the First Amendment prohibits the government from restricting political independent expenditures by corporations, associations, or labor unions.”⁴ That basically legalized bribery, and the decision led to a flood of money from oligarchs to PACs

today, a school one day, a church the next. To a point where gun violence is the leading cause of death amongst children. And over the last five years it has increased every year enormously, showing that this is not one unusually bad year but instead is a trend. (See *Figure Two*)

How did we get this way?

Things began to change in 1964 during the civil rights struggle when the death rate from firearms started to increase.

specifically committed to making Faustian bargains with Congress members to influence their vote. To get what you wanted.

For the corporations that made the weapons that meant massive contributions at both the state and federal level to make sure there was no liability for the manufacturer in a mass murder. Both state and federal levels were as lax as possible about licensing, training, or concealed carry. Everything a terrorist would want to do their killing. And it worked. Death by gun violence went up dramatically. (*See Illustration Four*) And this is still going on. In the states controlled by Republicans bizarre changes are occurring as I write.

In Florida, Republican governor Ron DeSantis signed a new law that will allow anyone who can legally own a gun in Florida to carry one concealed on their person without a permit. No training. No background check. It takes effect July 1.⁵ And what do you think will be the effect of this new law? This happened one week after six people were killed in the Nashville school shooting. In 2022, 9,229 men, women, and children died by gunfire in Florida. My prediction is that the Florida gun death

FIREARM DEATHS BY YEAR

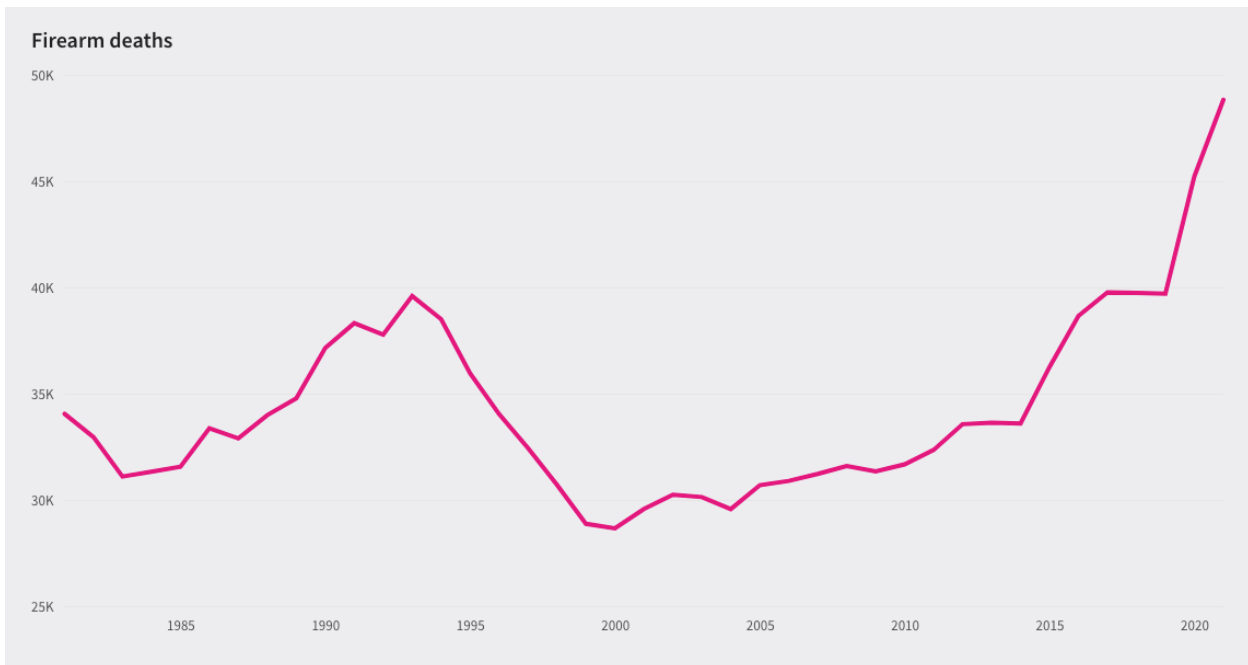


Illustration Three

rate will notably go up. It will be interesting to see how the voters of Florida react to that.

In Missouri, a few weeks earlier The Republican controlled House in Missouri overwhelmingly voted down -- 104-39 vote – a bill to ban minors from openly carrying firearms without adult supervision in public. The Republicans had voted to repeal concealed carry of firearms in 2017.⁶

In the U.S. Congress GOP Majority Leader Steve Scalise of Louisiana, the second most powerful Republican in the House, who himself had been shot while playing baseball, made his party’s position clear, “Taking guns away is not the answer.”⁷

It is when you put what is happening today into its historical context that it becomes glaringly obvious how much the Republican Party has changed. Few seem to remember today how radically different the current Republican position is from the Republican Party of the recent past. In 1972, Republican President Richard Nixon was adamantly in favor of banning handguns.

Oval Office recordings and White House memos from the Nixon years show that even as the NRA was transforming, he was willing to take them on to ban not just military grade weapons, but handguns. “I don’t know why any individual should have a right to have a revolver in his house,” Nixon said in a taped conversation with aides. “The kids usually kill themselves with it and so forth.” He asked why “can’t we go after handguns, period? I know the rifle association will be against it, the gun makers will be against it.” But “people should not have handguns.”⁸



Illustration Four

The politics of the American gun pandemic have a whole range of social consequences that are rarely properly discussed. For starters, when was the last time you heard or read anyone talking about what gun violence costs our society in direct medical costs? Did you imagine that gun violence in the U.S. costs as much as Medicaid? (*See Figure Four*)

It has reached a point where according to a report published by Everytown Research & Policy as of 13 February 2023, 120 Americans are killed with guns and 200 more are shot and wounded every day.⁹ (*See Illustration Five*) Those are the kind of figures you see in open wars, and they are having an impact on American society.

But I want to go deeper into the gun violence numbers because that reveals the culture of the gun problem, and culture is the key to what makes America so different from the rest of the world.

The Kaiser Family Foundation studied guns and culture in depth and detail and reported, “Experiences with gun-related incidents are common among U.S. adults. One in five (21%) say they have personally been threatened with a gun, a similar share (19%) say a family member was killed by a gun (including death by suicide), and nearly as many (17%) have personally witnessed someone being shot. Smaller shares have personally shot a gun in self-defense (4%) or been injured in a shooting (4%). In total, about half (54%) of all U.S. adults say they or a family member have ever had one of these experiences.

“Gun-related injuries and deaths, as well as worries about gun violence, disproportionately affect people of color in the U.S. Three in ten Black adults (31%) have personally witnessed someone being shot, as have one-fifth of Hispanic adults (22%). One-third of Black adults (34%) have a family member who was killed by a gun, twice the share of White adults who say the same (17%). In addition, one-third of Black adults (32%) and Hispanic adults (33%) say they worry either “every day,” or “almost every day” about themselves or someone they love being a victim of gun violence (compared to one in ten White adults). And one in five Black adults (20%) and Hispanic adults (18%) feel like gun-related crimes,

deaths, and injuries are a “constant threat” to their local community, more than double the share among White adults (8%).”¹⁰

Then consider the huge gender bias in gun violence. Women in the US are 28 times more likely to be killed with a gun than women in other high-income countries.¹¹ There is no other developed nation with numbers anything like those of America. Nearly one million women alive today have been shot or shot at by an intimate partner. Over 4 and half million report they have been threatened by an intimate partner holding a gun. Every month an average of 70 women in the US are shot and killed by an intimate partner, and many more are shot and wounded.¹² Access to guns makes it five time more likely a woman will be killed by an intimate partner.¹³

The racial numbers are equally alarming, which means they are having a particularly strong social and community effect on non-White populations.

- Young Black Americans (ages 15 to 34) experience the highest rates of gun homicides across all demographics.¹⁴
- Black Americans are 10 times more likely than white Americans to die by gun homicide.¹⁵
- In 2020, 12,179 Black Americans were killed with guns, compared with 7,286 white Americans.¹⁶
- While Black Americans made up 12.5 percent of the U.S. population that year, they were the victims in 61 percent of all gun homicides.¹⁷
- Black Americans are three times more likely than white Americans to be fatally shot by police.¹⁸
- 60 percent of gun deaths among Hispanic and Latino people are gun homicides.¹⁹
- Young Hispanic Americans (ages 15 to 29) represent 4 percent of the population yet are victims in 8 percent of all gun homicides.²⁰
- In 2015, half of all gun homicides took place in just 127 cities across the country: Gun homicides are concentrated in a relatively small number of neighborhoods in these cities, which have historically been under-resourced and racially segregated.²¹

And that’s not the end of it. NPR reported, “life expectancy in this country, and the availability of guns is part of the reason why U.S. life expectancy lags behind similar

wealthy, developed countries. And gun deaths encompass not just interpersonal violence, but also suicide and injuries.”²²

So what do we do about this epidemic of death that has become the major causing of children dying in the United States? Start with this: there are more guns than people in the United States. As I write this there are 336,380,303 people. The National Shooting Sports Foundation, the gun industry’s trade group, publishes firearm production reports that draw on a host of sources, including the ATF, the U.S. International Trade Commission, and the Congressional Research Service. In 2020, the group reported that “the estimated total number of overall firearms in civilian possession is 433.9 million.”²³

Start with who owns guns. They are owned by a minority of people. Less than a third of American adults, by the Pew Research Center’s calculation in 2017, owned a weapon. Three-in-ten American adults told Pew they currently own a gun, and another 11% say they don’t personally own a gun but live with someone who does. Among those who don’t currently own a gun, about half say they could see themselves owning one in the future. Gun ownership is more common among men than women, and white men are particularly likely to be gun owners.²⁴ Sadly, by 2019 those figures were out-of-date because during the Pandemic gun ownership soared to unprecedented levels in 2020 and 2021.²⁵

But there is some good news emerging in this all this death and suffering. The National Shooting Sports Foundation estimates that new gun ownership fell to 16 million in 2022, after reaching a high of 21 million in 2020.²⁶ That decrease may be the clue as to how we stop being a country where the leading cause of death for children is a bullet in their bodies, and American women and people of color face a level of risk seen nowhere else in the developed world.

Gun ownership in the United States is not only a matter of law it is a matter of choice and seen collectively a cultural issue, and culture is the product of individual attitudes and choices. If the attitudes change, and people make different choices the culture changes.

I think what is particularly changing the culture is the school mass shootings that are occurring with increasing frequency. According to *The Washington Post* over 349,000 children in the U.S. have experienced gun violence.²⁷ And we are now seeing younger generations turn out for public demonstrations in numbers not seen since the civil rights era. Consciousness is the key here. Consciousness can change culture, as both Gandhi and Martin Luther King demonstrated for the world. Just as was true then and is true to today, change in consciousness is made by individual choices.

If you have a chance to support these young people, with money or some other action, please take the opportunity and do so. For America to prepare properly for climate change, our nations obsessive gun psychosis must be healed. Guns are part of the problem. But so is the consciousness of those who use them to harm themselves or others. And their consciousness is shaped by misery, depression, hate, resentment, and fear. We have become a country with only one social priority, profit. We need to become a country where the priority is to foster wellbeing.

Other countries have done this, so can we. The choices you and I make matter.

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