

Gun Control in The United States

As horrible as it sounds, almost every year the United States suffers at least one case of a mass shooting with lethal consequences. Such incidents occur in schools, office environments, student campuses, hotel lobbies, cafes, and many other public places. The news media highlights each of them in all details, often spreading—intentionally or not—the feeling of total insecurity among the population. Of course, not only the United States suffers from mass shootings. European countries such as France, Norway, Germany, and Great Britain have experienced similar problems in the not-so-distant past. However, there is a big difference: in Europe, mass shootings are often terrorism acts, committed by people with strong and radical political and/or religious beliefs. Such was the case of the infamous Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, or Paris shooting that happened in April 2017. In the United States, in its turn, such incidents happen, supposedly, because of extremely lax gun control laws—in addition to a plethora of other reasons.

But why is America holding its guns so dearly if it causes so much trouble?

First of all, according to the Bill of Rights containing amendments to the American Constitution, any American citizen has a right to bear arms. This is the famous Second Amendment. As it reads, “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.” The right is not ultimate, meaning that it is regulated by a number of firearms control rules (Legal Information Institute). But, in the majority of cases, if a person is mentally healthy, had no problems with the law, and has reached a certain age, there is nothing standing between them and the closest guns and ammo store.

Secondly, there is a powerful group of lobbyists fiercely protecting the existing gun policies and struggling for their expansion—the National Rifle Association. Its attitude and motivation can be probably explained best by the words of its CEO Wayne LaPierre, spoken during one of the annual association’s conferences. He said, “There are terrorists and home invaders and drug cartels and carjackers and knockout gamers and rappers, haters, campus killers, airport killers ... I ask you: do you trust the government to protect you? We are on our own ... The things we care about most are changing ... It’s why more and more Americans are buying firearms and ammunition” (The Guardian). The NRA constantly lobbies politicians who are proponents of looser gun policies, and their influence is incredibly strong. Moreover, when a CEO of such a renowned and authoritative organization makes claims that the best way of protecting oneself from the dangers of the modern world is weapons, it can have its consequences. Everyone has their own understanding of what “dangerous” means.

Any system, even the most advanced one, has its flaws. Representative democracy, while being probably the most optimal form of government available nowadays, is imperfect, and does not guarantee effective solutions to the problems a state faces. Capitalism, while encouraging competition and thus making progress to move forward, is in many ways an inhumane and ruthless form of organizing economic relationships within a society. A right to bear arms, while theoretically providing effective means of self-defense and ensuring one’s security, fails to guarantee safety in reality.

Of course, people purchasing weapons are supposed to undergo background checks—procedures ensuring they can be allowed to own firearms. Today, in order to buy a gun, a person needs to have no criminal records, mental illnesses, or a history of illegal drug abuse. If a person served in the army and

left it because of dishonorable discharge, he or she cannot own weapons as well. Those who want to buy firearms must also be living on the territory of the United States legally, and have no restraint orders keeping them away from partners or children (The New York Times).

However, in practice, it turns out that the system does not work as intended. Gun-controlling initiatives currently existing in the United States fail to fully ensure that a person purchasing a gun can be trusted with it. For example, a mass shooting in South Carolina in 2015, committed by a white racist in a church attended mostly by black visitors, could have been prevented. Due to the imperfections in the background checking system, not all of the information about the attacker could be retrieved in time (he had been arrested for using illegal drugs), and so he was able to buy a gun (The Guardian).

According to The Guardian, the gun control initiative supported by Donald Trump's administration do not "change the categories of who is barred from buying a gun, or even require all gun buyers to pass a background check before they can purchase a firearm [...] Instead, it simply provides federal agencies with a few more incentives to submit records to the background check system – something they are already required by law to do."

(The Guardian).

Also, there are several loopholes allowing to bypass background checks. Some of these loopholes are the size of a massive black hole, figuratively speaking. One of them is the "gun show loophole." In the United States, only licensed gun dealers are required to perform background checks. This rule, however, does not apply to small-scale vendors, who do business at gun shows. For some reason, the law does not make them check their clientele for unsightly biographical facts.

As for mental illnesses, the situation is not that simple as well. Those who knew people who committed mass shootings recognized them as untrustworthy and disturbed, or even knew about their mental illnesses. So, how could they buy weapon? The law states that a person who is "mentally defective" cannot own firearms; however, in reality, such a formulation is almost never used. Such a status, even if given to a mentally unhealthy patient, is often successfully reversed through court (The New York Times).

The situation with gun control currently existing in the United States probably cannot be called normal. On one side, the right to bear firearms and to protect one's life with its help is guaranteed to American citizens by the Constitution. There are numerous laws and rules regulating the procedures of gun purchase. On the other hand, the system is imperfect, and rather often firearms can be purchased even by drug addicts or mentally unstable individuals. It might have been easier to simply ban guns from legal purchase, and there are many proponents of such measures. However, there are also many powerful lobbyists such as the National Rifle Association who do not agree with the idea of guns being prohibited. Most likely, the debate around this problem—as well as its direct outcomes such as mass shootings—will continue.