ACCESS UPDATE:

Don’t Shoot!

The Plague of Guns in America

By Robert Mikkelsen, April 24, 2018

Daisy Hernandez, 22, wrote "Don't Shoot," on her hands during the "March for Our Lives" rally in support of gun control, March 24, 2018, in Washington.
Horror in Parkland

February 14 is Valentine’s Day in the USA, a day of hope and romance. At Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, 3,200 students arrived with handmade Valentine cards for classmates and flowers for their teachers. It was otherwise a normal school day. A fire drill was held.

Lunch time came and went with exchanges of cards and greetings. Then, strangely, at about two thirty in the afternoon the fire alarm went off again and as students rushed into the corridors, the shooting began. Nikolas Cruz, a former student now expelled, had returned with a vengeance, gunning down students on sight as they ran screaming away from him. Wearing a gasmask, he was armed with a semi-automatic AR-15 assault rifle, firing in bursts as he moved from room to room.

Following drills, teachers yelled that students should get back into their classrooms. Some shut their doors and told everyone to hide by the walls. One girl saw a teacher shot dead in front of her as he tried to lock the door. It remained open as the killer passed by in the hallway. He taunted students to come out from other rooms, yelling “Hey! Hey!” They stayed put. One student played dead when the gunman entered his classroom. When he eventually got up, he found two of his classmates had been killed. Sarah Crescitelli, 15, heard shots ringing out and texted her mother, “If I don’t make it I love you and I appreciate everything you did for me.” In the hallway, Aaron Feis, a football coach and security guard, stepped directly into the path of the bullets to protect his students and paid for it with his life. “It’s not real,” said Victoria Olvera, 17, in disbelief afterwards. “It’s not real at all.”

It was all over in about six minutes. Seventeen people were left dead and another seventeen wounded. When the police showed up, Cruz left the building, mixing in with other students leaving with their hands in the air. He was arrested shortly afterwards without resistance and will now stand trial for his crime. But nothing will bring back the lives lost or change the horror of that day for the thousands of threatened high school students in Parkland.
Living with the unimaginable – the numbers

It was the eighth school shooting of 2018 – and the year was young. In 2017, there were 77 incidents involving guns at primary and secondary schools, according to the Gun Violence Archives. Since 2014, there have been an astounding 239 shootings in schools and campuses around the nation, according to The New York Times, resulting in 138 deaths.

And all this is just the tip of the iceberg. Although they grab national and international attention, mass shootings like that at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School make up only a small fraction (3%) of American gun casualties. Since 2014, over 56,000 Americans have been shot to death, including 2720 children under the age of 12 who were killed or injured.


Add to this the fact that the great majority of gun deaths in America are suicides – about twice the number of homicides – and the total gun deaths per year is now over 38,000, a
number that has been increasing over the past years. Since 2016, there have been more than 100 gun deaths per day in the USA. No other modern industrial country comes close to these numbers.

How has this happened?
The roots of American gun culture run deep. In the days when people lived on the frontier, the ability to wield firearms to hunt and to protect yourself and your family was a virtue. Learning to use them was a rite of passage for many a young man and woman. This has been celebrated in countless Western novels and films.

Equally important, when Americans fought for their independence against Great Britain, much of the fighting was done by local militias – informal military groups supporting the regular army. Every household that contributed to the militia was expected to have

![From the Western movie Shane](image)
weapons and be ready to join the fight if called. This principle of armed civic defense was famously included in the Second Amendment of the Constitution, adopted in 1791, which read: “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.”

Note the words “free state.” This is a political statement. It was not just foreign invaders the militia could be used against. They could also be used against America’s own federal government, if it attempted to use the regular army to take away the people’s freedom. This reflected the distrust of central power built into the American form of government from the start. It is a distrust that lives on in present-day America.

**Modern times**

In the 20th century the wealth and mass production of the consumer economy turned guns into an easily accessible commodity. After the Second World War, excess guns were flushed back into civilian life at bargain prices. Manufacturers sought new markets with new products. The number of guns available shot up. This is a trend that has followed America into the 21st century. Since 1994 the number of guns has increased by 38%, from 194 to 265 million – more than one gun for every adult.
Now, step back for a second and imagine you live in such a society. What are your choices? You can’t avoid guns, but you could decide not to have one. That, however, might leave you helpless if you feel threatened by someone who does have one. You may hate guns, but you may not dare be without one. There is a kind of sinister logic to it – an arms race on a personal level. In case you think this is a purely hypothetical situation, let me tell you a personal story from America.

When my mother was in her late 70s, she lived alone in a neighborhood that was becoming poorer and more dangerous in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There were shooting incidents nearby. She became frightened that someone might break into her house to rob or attack her. So, she decide to get a gun. She hated guns. Neither she nor my father had ever owned one. But she was scared and she was old. Now, here is the catch. It wasn’t a real gun. It just looked like one. “If it were real I might kill someone,” she pointed out. She kept it in the night table by her bed. What she didn’t think about was that if she ever waved it around, someone with a real gun might shoot first.

Gun control

Guns are the center of a bitter debate in America. They have become part of the Culture Wars, a series of conflicts between conservatives and liberals spanning a variety of issues. Opposing gun control on the right, you can find most of the Republican Party, most of the South and West, and most people living in the countryside. Supporting gun control on the left, you can find most of the Democratic Party, most of the East and West coasts and most people living in the cities. The word “most” is being used here intentionally. Gun control is an issue that splits people in all regions of the country right down to the family level.

Neither side has the intention of rounding up all the guns and taking them away. That would be unrealistic. More to the point, it would be unconstitutional. In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled that the Second Amendment gave all Americans a fundamental right to possess firearms in their homes for self-defense (with or without a state militia being involved). It turns out my mother was exercising her constitutional rights.
Instead of taking away the guns, efforts have focused on passing national legislation to control who can own them. It has been a seesaw battle. Under the Democrats in 1968 a Gun Control Act was passed controlling interstate gun sales and sales to “prohibited persons” – criminals and the mentally disturbed. Under the Republicans in 1986, the Firearm Owners Protection Act reversed many of the Gun Control Act provisions, protecting gun owners’ rights. Under the Democrats in 1994, a temporary ten-year ban on assault weapons like the one used in Parkland was passed. In 2004, under the Republicans, it was allowed to die a quiet death. And so on.

The arguments

Groups generally opposing gun control, like the powerful National Rifle Association (NRA) and the Gun Owners of America (GOA), argue that the problem is not guns. The problem is people. “Guns don’t kill. People kill,” is their slogan. From this perspective, the answer is not to disarm Americans, but to teach them to better use weapons to defend themselves. More guns, not less, is the answer to public safety. That is why one of the reactions among gun control opponents to the Parkland massacre was to recommend arming all teachers in Florida (a suggestion roundly rejected by the teachers there).

Another argument is that gun control laws would only limit the access of law-abiding citizens to guns, but not of criminals who can get guns illegally – leaving citizens vulnerable. In addition, “states rights” complicate the issue. Individual states can have wildly different laws regulating gun sales and ownership. It is of little help to ban the sale of assault rifles in Vermont if you can drive across the border and buy one in Connecticut.

National legislation is necessary, but opponents of gun control have time and again been able to derail adopting stricter gun control laws on the federal level. Both the NRA and
the GOA keep track of Congressmen and Senators, punishing those who dare to favor gun control by giving money and support to their political opponents. This has proven effective. Despite the fact that an overwhelming majority of Americans (about 90%) favor national legislation that would require background checks on all persons buying guns (including men like Nikolas Cruz) no such law has been adopted.

This lack of action led America’s President, Barack Obama, to reflect in frustration in October 2015:

Earlier this year, I answered a question (about gun control) in an interview by saying, “The United States of America is the one advanced nation on Earth in which we do not have sufficient common-sense gun-safety laws — even in the face of repeated mass killings.” And later that day, there was a mass shooting at a movie theater in Lafayette, Louisiana. That day! Somehow this has become routine. The reporting is routine. My response here at this podium ends up being routine. The conversation in the aftermath of it. We’ve become numb to this.

Maybe not....
March for Our Lives!

Four days after the Parkland shooting, a group of students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School took matters into their own hands. They called for a demonstration for tighter gun control to be held in Washington, D.C. on March 24, 2018. It was aptly called “March for Our Lives!” They dared their elders to do something about the threat they and all their fellow students and pupils in America lived under. They called for universal background checks, raising the age of gun ownership to 21 and restoring the assault weapon ban of 1994. Survivors of shootings and relatives of victims rallied to their call, as did hundreds of thousands of ordinary Americans. On the day, an estimated 1.2 to 2 million people marched for gun control at arrangements all over the nation, making it one of the biggest youth protests ever held.

The organizers of the demonstration urged their fellow students to register to vote and make gun control a key issue in the upcoming Congressional elections in November 2018. In Parkland, Douglas High School student Sari Kaufman urged people to “turn this moment into a movement” that would push out of office any politician who took money from the NRA. ”They think we’re all talk and no action,” she said. “Don’t just go out and vote: Get 17 other people to go out and vote!” In Washington, fellow Douglas student David Hogg asked, “Who here is going to vote in the 2018 election? (Applause) If you listen real close, you can hear people in power shaking.”

Time for change?

Are they shaking? The jury is still out. The NRA has certainly not given up the fight. It characterized the March for Our Lives demonstrations as part of a “plan to DESTROY the Second Amendment.” Florida Republican Senator Marco Rubio declared that banning guns “ultimately will not prevent these tragedies.” On the other hand, Florida Republican Governor Rick Scott backed the passage of new state gun control legislation in the teeth of NRA opposition. And in Montana – a Western state with a lot of hunters – the Democratic Governor declared,
“Enough’s enough – (the NRA) doesn’t represent me and they don’t represent either the mainstream of America or the mainstream of firearm owners.”

Meantime the debate continues. It stretches from the halls of power in Washington right down to the most personal levels. Returning to Parkland on February 15, Sarah Crescitelli’s father, John, feared his daughter had been killed and was shaking when they were re-united. “These school shootings have to stop,” he said. “This is crazy.” But when asked if it should lead to stricter gun control, he dodged the bullet. “I don’t want to get into a gun debate. I really don’t. What are you going to do? Confiscate everybody’s guns? We have millions and millions of weapon … I’m a gun owner. I don’t want the government taking my gun.”

So, America remains of two minds. Perhaps the upcoming November elections will decide if this time – this time – enough finally is enough.

TASKS

1 **AFTER READING**

Did you find evidence in this article to back up the list of impressions you made at the start? Did it give you new impressions? If so, add them to your list. Then sit with a fellow student and compare results.

2 **TRUE OR FALSE?**

Read the article, and then check of true and false for the statements below.
Afterwards compare your answers with a classmate and finally check them against the text.

Who got the most correct?

a. The shooting in Parkland was the sixth of 2018.
b. Mass shootings make up about 3% of all gun deaths.
c. The great majority of gun deaths in America are homicides.
d. The Second Amendment was adopted in 1789.
e. There are more guns than people in America.
f. Most Democrats support gun control.
g. The ban on assault rifles was allowed to lapse.
h. The NRA is a government organization.
i. *March for Our Lives* was started in Washington.
j. Almost 2 million people demonstrated on March 24, 2018.
k. Marco Rubio believes in banning guns.
l. Americans agree about how to stop mass shootings.

3 DISCUSSION

Form groups of three and work with one or more of the following questions.

a. If you lived in the United States, would you own a gun? Give reasons for your answer.
b. American films and TV shows are full of guns and gunfights. Choose two or three examples of this (each of you separately), and then discuss why they are so popular. Do you think they are as popular in Norway as they are in America, or are they viewed differently here?
c. America and the world was surprised by the size and scope of the *March for Our Lives* movement. But why did it happen just then? And why did it inspire so many?
4 RESEARCH

Give a brief report to your class on one of the following issues:

a. *March for Our Lives* wanted young people to register to vote. How successful were they? What kinds of actions were taken to register to vote after the demonstrations?

b. What efforts have been made to pass gun control legislation on the federal level since the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School? How successful have these been?

c. How much money does the National Rifle Association (NRA) spend per year to influence politicians on the state and federal level? Does it have other ways of influencing opinion and affecting the political process?

d. Follow the November 2018 Congressional election in one state, reporting on how the issue of gun control is debated and what influence it may have had on the final results in that state. You can – if you wish – concentrate on one seat for the House of Representative (Congressperson) or Senate (Senator).

e. After the election, report what the press has to say about the impact of the issue of gun control. Was *March for Our Lives* able to make it a central issue?
a  Look at the graph below and find answers to these questions:
- What percentage of Americans are dissatisfied with US gun laws in 2018?
- What percentage are satisfied or want less strict laws?
- How has the percentage of those wishing stricter laws changed since 2014?
- How has the percentage of those who are satisfied changed since 2014?
- What can you conclude about the general changes in attitudes to gun laws since 2014?

b  Look at the table below and answer the following questions.
- Which four countries have the largest percentage of gun homicides?
- Which have the lowest?
- How do the four Nordic countries compare to one another?
- What can you conclude in general from this graph?

Gun homicide rates are 25.2 times higher in the US than in other high-income countries

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<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Gun-Related Deaths</th>
<th>Homicides</th>
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c Sum up the information given in the table below and suggest why the difference between types of guns used in murders is so great.

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