



# What is gun control?

## Fast Facts

When gun violence, including school shootings, appear in the news, it often spurs the ongoing debate about how to handle gun violence in the United States. You may be wondering what laws already exist for gun owners and how the issue of gun control is different in the U.S. than other countries.

### What is “gun control”?

- **Gun control** refers to legislation that regulates or controls the ownership of firearms, restricts certain types of firearms, or determines where and how they may be carried. Some examples of gun control are **background checks**, gun permits or licenses, required gun safety training, not being allowed to carry a weapon in a school or a bar, or not being allowed to own certain weapons as a civilian.
- There are multiple types of gun violence in the U.S. and different but intersecting conversations around preventing each.
  - There were [45,222 firearm-related deaths](#) in the U.S. in 2020, as reported by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). About 54% were suicides and about 43% were homicides.
    - Opponents of gun control argue that stricter laws around guns won't prevent mass violence because both suicide and homicide can be committed by a legal gun owner.
    - Advocates for suicide prevention sometimes lobby for stricter gun laws around **waiting periods** for purchasing a gun because most suicides are committed during moments of crisis and survivors often never try again. However, those [attempting suicide with a firearm](#) often don't live to get a second chance.
  - Firearm-related injuries rank in the top five causes of death for U.S. citizens up to age 64. Assault by firearm accounts for 70 percent of nonfatal firearm-related injuries, while unintentional injury accounts for 20 percent.
    - Both sides of the gun control debate point to **domestic violence** as a major predictor of homicide, assault with firearms, and **mass shootings**. Between 2009 and 2018, [at least 54 percent of mass shootings](#), defined as shootings in which more than three people are killed in one event, were related to domestic or family violence. In more than half of school and public mass shootings, the [perpetrator killed a female family member](#) directly before committing a larger act of violence.

### What federal laws exist for gun control? Does Washington state have any additional laws?

- The **National Firearms Act (NFA) of 1934** was the first major federal gun legislation in the U.S. in response to the [St. Valentine's Day Massacre](#). The law requires the registration of certain firearms, taxes on the sale and manufacture of firearms, and restricted sales and ownership of machine guns.
- The **Gun Control Act (GCA) of 1968** passed after the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy. The law ended mail-order sales of all firearms and ammunition and banned

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the sale of guns to minors, felons, fugitives from justice, people who use illegal drugs, persons with mental illness, and those with dishonorable discharges from the armed forces.

- The [Firearms Owners' Protection Act of 1986 \(FOPA\)](#) eased many GCA restrictions. [Opponents of gun control](#) lauded FOPA for expanding where firearms could be sold and who could sell them but objected to prohibitions on machine guns for civilian use.
- In 1989, the administration of President George H. W. Bush announced a permanent ban on importing assault rifles. Many opponents of gun control today point to the domestic manufacturing of assault weapons as boosting local economies and creating innovation. Congress also [banned the manufacture and sale of specific assault weapons in 1994](#), but the ban expired in 2004.
- The **Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act of 1993** passed as an amendment to the GCA. It required a 5-day waiting period for all handgun sales so that a background check could be run. It expired in 1998 and was replaced by the [National Instant Criminal Background Check System \(NICS\)](#), a database that verifies if a buyer can possess a firearm.
- After lawsuits against gun manufacturers, Congress passed the [Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act \(PLCAA\)](#) and the [Child Safety Lock Act of 2005](#). The first act limited the liability of gun manufacturers and dealers when their firearms were used in crimes, and the second act required anyone licensed to transfer or sell firearms to provide gun storage or safety devices.
- [The US Supreme Court ruling in District of Columbia v. Heller \(2008\)](#) determined that the Second Amendment prohibits the federal government from making it illegal for private individuals to keep loaded handguns in their homes. It was the first Supreme Court decision to explicitly rule that the Second Amendment is an individual right, and the decision clarified that it allows for limits on the types of arms that can be kept and how they are used.
- Washington state has [several additional laws](#):
  - All residents of Washington state must obtain a [concealed pistol license](#), in person, in order to **concealed carry** (carry a weapon somewhere it isn't readily visible).
  - [State law designates](#) certain areas where it can be a violation to have a firearm, even with a concealed carry license: these include restricted access areas of a jail, other law enforcement facilities, mental health facilities, and a commercial service airport; the area used in connection with court proceedings; areas classified by the liquor and cannabis board as off-limits to persons under 21 years of age; and public or private [elementary and secondary school premises](#).
  - [It is a crime](#) to possess a firearm if you are under the age of 18, unless possession is permissible under one of the [exceptions listed](#).

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