What is stopping America from following Australia and the UK's gun regulation laws?

What are America's current gun laws and why is this an issue?

As a result of lenient gun laws and the "right" to bear arms, America is one of the easiest countries to own a firearm (Otieno, 2018). Adopted on December 15, 1791, the Second Amendment protects American citizen's right to own and bear arms; consequently, the government cannot infringe on this under any circumstance (McGinn 2018). In 39 of the 50 states in America, permits/registration or background checks are not mandatory when purchasing firearms. In these states, possession of an assault weapon is permitted, despite these firearms being common in mass shootings (Otieno, 2018). According to founder of GunPolicy.org, Professor Philip Alpers, an estimated 270 million privately owned guns are within America, equating to approximately 101 guns per 100 people (see Fig 1).

![Population of the world: 7.13 billion | Civilian-owned guns in the world: 644 million](source: UNODC, Small Arms Survey, via The Guardian)

A detailed examination of death certificates from all 50 states found that 33,000 people are killed each year from gun related causes (see Fig 2), with 12,000 of these being homicides and over 300 resulting from mass shootings (McGinn 2018). This study concludes that in America, the rate of death by firearm is 4 per 100,000 people, a rate similar that of deaths from motor vehicle accidents (Batsakis, 2018). This key finding is supported by numerical data from America's Gun Violence Archives and Centres for Disease Control Cause of Death database (Cupac 2016).

![Homicides by firearm per 1 million people](source: UNODC, Small Arms Survey, via The Guardian)

**Figure 1:** American Population and gun ownership comparison.
*(The Guardian, 2009)*

**Figure 2:** American Homicide rate per 1 million people.
*(Vox, 2012)*
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America’s excessive number of guns, and consequently high death rate, is illustrated within this key finding. Correlating statistical evidence relates this to frequent mass shootings and gun-related homicides. Analysis of several archival databases, determining causes of death, ascertains that since 2009, the U.S has witnessed over 200 incidences of school shootings, increasing the ongoing debate regarding gun laws and regulations (Otieno 2018; Rossetti 2017). Further analyses of data conducted by Erin Grinshteyn and David Hemenway (2017), PhD holders in public health, confirm that America’s homicide rate is 25% higher than other developed countries. In addition, America’s homicide rate is the highest globally (Beckett 2017). American social commentator, Michael Moore’s opinion (2002) that in America, the number of firearms is excessive, is frequently reinforced by popular opinion. This issue evokes stronger emotion than other debates, including abortion and immigration, thus causing frequent tension between public and politicians (Otieno, 2018). University of Sydney Associate Professor Philip Alpers (2017) agrees with this opinion, stating, “If guns make people safe, the United States should be the safest place on Earth”. Alpers’ comment implies that the volume of firearms across the U.S has actually significantly decreased public safety.

What caused Australia and the UK to change their gun laws?

After similar mass shootings to those in the USA, Australia and the UK began regulating gun ownership. Stricter laws were central to these efforts, however public opinion and cultural norms played a critical role in preventing future gun violence (Jowit, 2017).

On March 13, 1996, 43-year old, Thomas Hamilton fatally shot 16 children and a teacher at Dunblane Primary School before turning the gun on himself (Wilkinson, 2013). This massacre, the worst in Britain at the time, had a colossal impact on the UK. The incident appalled the British public, raising fundamental questions such as, “How did a man like Hamilton gain access to a firearm?” (Wilkinson, 2013). A highly successful public campaign after Dunblane, accumulated over 750,000 signatures supporting new gun laws. In response, conservative Prime Minister John Major, set up a public inquiry into Britain’s gun laws (Baker, 2015; Jowit, 2017). Eighteen months after the Dunblane massacre, the UK banned all private ownership of handguns, semi-automatic and pump action rifles, thus giving the UK some of the strictest gun legislation in the world (Baker, 2015).

Across the world, Martin Bryant entered a café in Port Arthur, Tasmania. Using a semi-automatic rifle, he proceeded to kill 35 people, injuring 23. This massacre was the worst in Australian history (Grimson, 2016; Rossetti, 2017). Within two weeks of the crime, all Australia’s states and territories agreed to enact the same sweeping gun laws recently seen in the UK, banning all semi-automatic
rifles and shotguns (Baker, 2015). John Howard (ABC, 2016) then introduced a national gun ‘buyback policy’ for weapons missed in the initial ban, which lead to the smelting of over 650,000 surrendered firearms (Wahlquest 2017; Beauchamp 2018).

Both the UK and Australia made amendments to their laws after a mass shooting and in recent weeks, New Zealand has followed suit. These actions consequently sparked debate as to why America does not follow these examples (McGinn 2018). Despite America having frequent mass shootings they have not followed other developed countries and made amendments to gun laws. The key finding highlights the impact that a mass shooting has on gun legalisation in the UK, Australia and New Zealand but not in the USA.

What impact did these laws have on the guns in that country and on the society?

Expert in criminology Dr Fay-Ramirez, believes that the stringent guns laws implemented after the Port Author massacre caused a significant decrease in gun related homicide and suicide rates in Australia (BBC News, 2016). An officer within the Adelaide Police Firearms Unit (anonymous), supports this stating that after “the reforms of 1996, statistics would show a significant decline of instances of multiple fatality shootings across the nation” (Interview, anonymous, 2019). However, this statement is regularly disregarded by Shooting for Sport groups (Scotti, 2017). Numerous studies have been conducted by experts worldwide on these decreasing suicide and homicide rates, (Rosetti, 2017) contesting how much can be attributed to the reforms alone (Beck 2017). Furthermore, they compared the results of this research to quantitative data collated in the years leading up to the reforms. Many believe these rates where already on a decline and suicide prevention programs, among other factors, have contributed to decreasing gun related deaths, despite there being no scientific evidence to support this (Healey, 2018).

What is incontestable however, is that the rates of gun related homicide and suicides in Australia have decreased by 80% (Alpers, 2017) (see Fig 3). This key finding emphasises the point that the 1996-gun reforms had a positive influence on gun related deaths and gun numbers in Australia. According to Emeritus Professor Simon Chapman (2017), at least 650,721 guns were destroyed, and in recent years following the new gun laws this number has reached a million. Several experts, including Australian researcher Dr Samara McPhedran, believe the laws are the underlining reason why gun ownership is decreasing (Beauchamp 2018; BBC News 2016; Grimson 2016). However, the Australian Gun Lobby denies this statement, claiming homicide and suicide rates have been on a downward trend, believing that the reforms stole Australian’s right to protect themselves and that the laws should be revoked (Beck 2017).
The UK saw similar effects when its laws were introduced, with gun-related homicide and suicide rates dropping dramatically, by 60% in most causes (Wilkinson 2013). This key finding illustrates that there may be an association between stricter gun laws and gun-related deaths. Figure 4 demonstrates a comparison of USA and the UK. In America, 4 in every 100,000 people are killed each year from gun-related deaths, with only 0.04 killed in the UK (Interview Ward, 2019). This means Americans are 100 times more likely to be killed by a firearm than UK citizens. Sir Stephen House, a Chief Constable with over 1700 officers under his charge supports this, saying the reforms “also reduced the number of guns in circulation, only 2% of my officers carry guns” (Baker 2015).

There is evidence from both Australia and the UK that as a consequence of tighter gun laws, the rate of gun deaths and the number of guns in circulation has decreased significantly. Both countries have not had a mass shooting since the introduction of the new gun laws (Alpers 2017; Wilkinson 2013).
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America's gun culture, the NRA and its effects

The National Rifle Association of America (NRA) has been called, “America’s third Political Party” because of their ability to influence politics, particularly the Republican Party (Christian, 2017). The NRA was founded in 1871 shortly after the Civil War, and until halfway through the 20th century was known as a marksmanship organisation, home for hunters and collectors (BBC, 2016). Since then it has grown into the most powerful special interest group in the U.S with over 5 million members (How to Sell A Massacre Part 1, 2019) and a substantial budget of around $250 million U.S dollars annually (NRA, 2019). During an undercover investigation conducted by independent news organization Al Jazeera, it was concluded that this money is spent on lobbying, gun ranges, advertising, rallying voters and gun focused educational programmes (BBC, 2015). According to the official NRA website, they publicly grade members of Congress from A-F based on their support of the gun lobby. The NRA will oppose or support the candidate accordingly (Murder in Milwaukee, 2019). After analysts investigated the data from polls in relation to the NRA’s “grading” system it was found that this had a significant effect on poll numbers, even gaining a pro-gun candidate a seat (Christian 2017). The NRA states that most of their time is spent following candidates through job rankings, from city councillors to mayors, to governors and then to members of Congress (BBC, 2015). Spending much of their budget promoting themselves, the NRA takes pride in its “highly successful media machine”, advertising to a diverse range of American’s through social media, television and websites (Bowling for Columbine 2002; BBC 2016). Each time an anti-gun candidate bills for tighter gun control or acts of parliament that could jeopardise the NRA, they utilise their influences to eradicate the issue (How to Sell a Massacre Part 2, 2019). The key finding here is that the NRA can significantly influence political opinion.

America is known worldwide for its strong gun culture and combined with the NRA’s voice, makes it difficult for a shift in political attitude (Christian, 2017). When questioned by Michael Moore (Director of Bowling for Columbine), many believe that America’s gun culture stemmed from the U.S’s violent history. However, according to Philip Oltermann (2017), a journalist for The Guardian, Germany has, contestably, the most violent history of any other country and has a high rate of gun ownership, yet only 380 people are killed each year in gun related incidences, compared to the 33,000 killed in America. Oltermann (2017) suggests that America’s history is not to blame for gun related issues, a statement supported by Michael Moore (2002) and long-term researcher for The Herald Sun, Anthea Batsiks (McGinn 2018). Members of the American public, despite the murder rate in America decreasing by 20% in past years, claim firearms are a necessity. Furthermore, NRA members possess guns in order to protect themselves and their family, reinforcing the gun culture (How to sell a Massacre Part, 2019).
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In America, voting is not mandatory, therefore despite the majority of Americans supporting stricter gun laws, anti-gun candidates such as Hillary Clinton (see Fig 5) are not supported in ways that the NRA supports pro-gun candidates such as Donald Trump (Scotti, 2017). Despite overall murder rates decreasing, news coverage on murders and other crime has increased by 800% in recent years, according to American filmmaker Michael Moore (Bowling for Columbine, 2002). This key finding suggests that the increased exposure to crime via media channels has led to more American’s buying firearms in self-defence. In short, it is evident that more guns are being purchased than ever before.

Figure 5: NRA Advertisement refuting Hillary Clinton in U.S election.
(NRA, 2016)

America has over 270 million guns and the highest rate of gun ownership than any other country in the world (Beckett 2017). The University of Sydney (2017), calculates if the U.S were to follow in Australia and the UK’s footsteps, over 90 million firearms would be destroyed and America’s long history with the “right” to bear arms would be discredited. To enable this, America requires signatures from all states, agreeing to change the law, much like John Howard’s agreement between Australian States and Territories in the weeks after Port Arthur (Beck, 2017). However, due to the enormity of this, it is unlikely that America’s gun laws will ever change.

Conclusion

The evidence establishes two reasons why America has not followed Australia and the UK’s lead regarding gun regulation. The first being the NRA influence, a powerful gun lobby with over 5 million members and strong political leverage, who influence the laws passed in America (NRA, 2019). The second reason is that the gun culture in America is a critical factor in public opinion. The Second Amendment protects an American’s right to own and bear firearms, and prevents many Americans from voting against firearms in efforts to maintain the current gun culture (How to Sell a Massacre
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Part 2, 2019). Many Americans believe it is their fundamental right to use firearms as a form of self-defence (Bowling for Columbine, 2002). Despite overwhelming evidence from Australia and the UK to support a change in America’s gun legislation, laws remain lenient in comparison with other developed countries.

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