

YOU ASKED

Who Owns Guns in America?



COURTESY ROBERT SPITZER

“The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (part of the Bill of Rights) protects a ‘right to bear arms.’”

BY ROBERT J. SPITZER

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America has a tradition of national gun ownership and use dating to the nation’s origins. Yet the true nature of that tradition has been often romanticized, exaggerated or distorted. Even though modern American culture includes groups that support gun traditions and use, only some Americans share these beliefs.

Americans own about 270 million guns, nearly one for every person in the country; some Americans own more than one gun, and millions have no firearms at all. Gun owners are found throughout the country, but they are concentrated in rural areas and in the South. Long guns (rifles and shotguns) outnumber handguns by a ratio of 2-to-1. Most Americans who own long guns use them for hunting and sporting; most handguns are obtained for personal self-protection. Nationwide, gun ownership has gradually declined: In the 1960s, about half of American homes had at least one gun; today, guns are found only in about one-third of homes.



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Gun shops like this one in Nashville, Tennessee, can lose their licenses to sell guns if they do not follow federal laws.

America’s gun tradition dates to the 17th century, when colonial settlers often had to provide their own protection. They formed militias to confront or ward off attacks by Native Americans or European forces. Yet until the middle of the 19th century, gun ownership was relatively rare, and most men who could serve in a militia knew little about firearm ownership or use.

Gun ownership increased dramatically after the American Civil War (1861–1865), when millions of men were exposed to guns for the first time;

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guns were mass-produced and aggressively marketed to civilians. Even so, and contrary to popular impression, America's frontier West of the 19th century was not nearly as violent or gun-happy as American movies and popular culture depicted. Gun laws, like those restricting gun-carrying, played an important role in taming western territories.

Gun ownership and use has continued to spark national debate. Most Americans support stronger gun laws, but also respect the preferences of gun owners. About 30,000 Americans are killed with firearms each year by gun suicide, homicide and accident. About 80 percent of all gun crimes are committed with handguns. Guns are sometimes used by civilians to thwart crime, and researchers continue to debate the types of defensive gun uses that are legitimate.

The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (part of the Bill of Rights) protects a "right to bear arms." It also mentions "a well regulated militia." Americans continue to debate how to interpret the Second Amendment. In 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court for the



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first time interpreted this constitutional language as covering private gun ownership for personal self-protection in the home. Even so, the court noted, the right is not unlimited, and gun regulations likely would continue to be legal.

Modern America has only a few national gun regulations, which mostly have resulted from public outrage over the spread and fear of gun-related crime, or the assassination of prominent figures. Among each of the 50 states and Washington, gun regulations range from lenient to strict.

In striking down Washington D.C.'s strict ban on handgun sales in July 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that the Second Amendment to the Constitution protects a citizen's right to own a gun without being part of a militia— adding that the right is not unlimited and still allows for firearms to be regulated.

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