

Why America is obsessed with guns

Charlie Kirk, who was struck down by an assassin's bullet, was a gun rights advocate. There are more guns than there are people in the United States. As other countries took common-sense steps on gun control, the US actively loosened rules. Why?

Written by [Arjun Sengupta](#)

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The towering rate of gun-ownership in the US, and the ease with which military-grade firearms can be obtained, “comes with a price”, Kirk had said in his 2023 comments quoted above. (NYT)

“...I think it's worth it...to have a cost of...some gun deaths every single year, so that we can have the Second Amendment to protect our other God-given rights...”, Charlie Kirk said in April 2023.

On Wednesday, the 31-year-old “Youth Whisperer of the American Right”, as The New York Times described Kirk, was killed by a single shot to his neck by a sniper in Utah.

Kirk's death spotlights, once again, America's absurd obsession with guns, and the polarising debate on the question that a CNBC commentator said in 2018 was “tearing the fabric of our civil society apart”.



A boy looks on as a customer inspects a pistol at the Saratoga Arms Fair at the City Center in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., Jan. 12, 2013. (The New York Times)

Uniquely American problem

There are more guns than there are people in the United States.

A comprehensive global study published in 2018 reported more than 1.2 guns per capita in the US, more than double that in war-torn Yemen, the next country on the list.

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Indeed, there were 46,728 gun-related deaths in the US in 2023, data compiled by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show. That's 128 gun deaths every day, and 14 gun deaths per 100,000 population. More than half these deaths were suicides.

The gun homicide rate in the US is 4.38 per 100,000 population – 26 times that of other high-income countries, a 2022 analysis by the gun-control advocacy group Everytown Research & Policy showed. The gun homicide rate in the UK is less than 0.05, and in Japan, 0.001 – zero, for all practical purposes.



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In the name of 'freedom'

In an essay published in 1970, conservative historian Richard Hofstadter wrote: "Many otherwise intelligent Americans cling with pathetic stubbornness to the notion that the people's right to bear arms is the greatest protection of their individual rights and a firm safeguard of democracy." ('America as a Gun Culture' in American Heritage magazine)

This, Hofstadter said, had to do with the "American historical mythology about the protective value of guns" as "an important counterpoise to tyranny". The gun had levelled the field in the

American Revolution (1775-83), allowing rag tag militiamen to take on the might of the British Crown; it had subsequently facilitated the conquest of the Wild West.

The right to bear firearms was protected by the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, which was ratified in 1791. 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."

James Madison, the Founding Father who went on to become the fourth President of the US (1809-17), wrote that European monarchies were "afraid to trust the people with arms"; if they did, "every tyranny in Europe would be speedily overturned in spite of the legions which surround it" (The Federalist Papers: No. 46, 1788).

Hofstadter noted in 1970 that Americans saw "an armed people [as] the only possible solution to the perennial conflict between militarism and freedom". Kirk, in his 2023 comments, argued that the Second Amendment was key to "defend[ing] yourself against a tyrannical government".

Making of Gun Country

A Department of Justice report submitted to President Lyndon B Johnson in 1969 noted that in the postwar years from 1945 to 1969, the population of the US had increased by less than 50%, but the number of guns, which was around 45 million in 1945, had doubled.

By 2018, the number of guns was 10 times that of 1945; the population of the US had grown by less than two and a half times in this period.

What explains the modern gun culture of the US? One answer lies in America's history with racism.

"American gun culture...is the story of a Constitution captured and travestied by a culture of violence. The first of these traditions is slavery...", historian Dominic Erdozain wrote in *One Nation Under Gun* (2024).

Firearms were essential for White slave owners to subjugate Black slaves in the plantations. After the Civil War (1861-65), when slavery was abolished in the South, the fear of Black retribution drove gun-ownership among Whites, and gave rise to forces such as the Ku Klux Klan.

In the 20th century, gun ownership continued to skyrocket, stoked by fears about crime, lawlessness, and the political empowerment of the historical Other. Immigration and anti-

communist fear-mongering during the Cold War further fuelled these fears.

This demand was met by an abundant supply of guns at the end of World War II. “Europe’s weapons of war, the production of a half century of continental bloodletting, flooded the US market at rock-bottom prices,” historian Andrew C McKeivitt wrote in *Gun Country* (2023). Soon, “gun capitalists [had] built a mass gun market”.

An American romance

Today, American gun capitalism, its wheels greased by powerful advocacy groups such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), makes the reality of a gun-filled US seem inevitable, almost innate. Guns have been imbued with meanings that go far beyond their basic material parts.

In Marxian terms, this is “commodity fetishism”, a process by which social relations of production, and the context of the production, are obscured by the ‘magic’ that the commodity in question is imbued with.

Indeed, the gun capitalists of the 19th century who sold “the magic of guns to American consumers” knew that “selling guns meant selling stories about guns and thus imbuing the guns with cultural meaning”, McKeivitt wrote in an article in Time Magazine.

The continued fetishizing of firearms has fundamentally distorted the gun debate in the US, even as countries around the world have, through common sense measures, reduced both gun ownership and gun violence.

After a spate of shootings in the 1980s and early 1990s, Australia got serious about gun control — as a result, total gun deaths fell from 2.9 per 100,000 in 1996 to just 0.88 per 100,000 in 2018, data from the Australian Gun Safety Alliance show.

The US went the other way — not only failing to act on gun control but actively loosening rules. In 2008, the Supreme Court struck down a ban on handguns in Washington [DC](#), and affirmed an individual’s right to bear arms for self-defence (*Columbia v. Heller*), opening the floodgates for legal challenges to allegedly “restrictive” laws on gun ownership.

More guns, more deaths

Powerful NRA figures have argued that “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun”. The problem, as Erdozain points out, is that “good people [can] have

bad days”, and that the “self-righteousness” of gun advocates creates “a permission structure for aggression”.

There is ample data to show that most gun deaths in the US cannot be neatly slotted in the good guy-bad guy binary.

The physician Arthur Kellerman showed in a series of rigorous studies in the 1980s and 1990s that the vast majority of gun homicides were the result of an argument, often drunken, with a friend or a wife, and that keeping a gun at home “was strongly and independently associated with an increased risk of homicide”. (Kellerman et al., ‘Gun Ownership as a Risk Factor for Homicide in the Home, 1993).

He famously said in 2008: “Citizens did not realize then, nor do we realize today, that the most likely person to do us harm already has a key to the house.”

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