

# Opinion There's no mystery about why the U.S. has so many gun deaths



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The [tragic mass shooting](#) last weekend in a Dallas suburb took place as I was leaving the country to visit Britain. I might as well have taken one of Elon Musk's rockets and landed on a different planet. The Allen, Tex., massacre means that, so far in 2023, [more than 15,000 Americans](#) have died from gun violence. In 2021, the last year for which we have [complete data](#), there were [48,830 gun-related deaths](#), of which 20,958 were gun homicides. In England and Wales, there were [31 gun homicides](#). Even accounting for its larger population, calculating deaths per 100,000 people, the United States in 2019 had roughly 100 times as many gun homicides as the United Kingdom.

A comparison of suicides is equally depressing. In 2021, [26,328 Americans](#) took their own lives using guns. About [half of the people](#) who kill themselves in the United States use guns to do it. In the U.K. in 2019, [that number was 117](#), and of all suicides, death by firearm is one of the [rarest methods](#). With 4 percent of the world's population, the United States has about [44 percent](#) of the world's gun suicides.

Britain is actually a useful point of comparison. In cultural terms, it is this country's closest relative, the mother ship that created the colonies from which the United States of America sprang. It has strong traditions of individualism, rights and liberty that prefigure America's. Even [the more violent strains of American culture](#) — the Scots-Irish tradition in parts of the South — owe their origins to the British Isles.

And yet, with regard to contemporary gun violence, Britain looks like [most other advanced industrial countries](#). The United States, meanwhile, might as well be on another planet.

Perhaps because it draws on the same history of liberties and rights as America, Britain was not always exempt from the problems of gun violence and mass shootings. In fact, British gun laws changed substantially after two mass shootings: in 1987 in Hungerford and then another in 1996 in Dunblane. In the latter case, a man entered a primary school in Scotland armed with four handguns and 743 rounds of ammunition. He went into a gym full of children and opened fire. In just a few minutes, he caused the deaths of 17 people and then turned the gun on himself.

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After those two massacres, it was Conservative governments that passed gun control laws, significantly restricting the use of firearms. When Tony Blair swept into power in a landslide in 1997, his Labour government expanded on those laws, and today there's an almost total ban on handguns, as well as automatic and semiautomatic weaponry, in most of the U.K. Britons were given a few months to hand in their weapons in a government buyback program. These laws remain in place today, and gun violence of all kinds has declined markedly over the past 25 years across Britain. A similar gun ban and buyback took place in Australia after a gruesome massacre there in 1996. (It was also enacted by a Conservative government.) Since then, gun homicides and suicides have declined in that country, as well.

One study by the nonprofit Everytown for Gun Safety suggests that U.S. states that have strong gun control laws are much safer from gun violence. For example, the gun-death rate in New York state, which has some of the strongest gun control laws, is only a fraction of the national average. Overall, the states with the most permissive gun laws have almost triple the gun-death rates of those with the most stringent. According to the Nationhood Lab, living in the Northeast means you have a much lower likelihood of gun-related homicides or suicides than in the Deep South.

It's true that some states with strong gun laws, such as Illinois, don't reap the full benefits of these laws because of neighboring states that are more lax. But you also see the equivalent phenomenon in reverse. States such as New Hampshire, with weak gun laws, have low gun deaths, helped by the fact that their neighboring states have enacted tougher measures.

Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, true to form, pulled out an old cliché in his response to the mass shooting in Allen. "People want a quick solution," he said. "The long-term solution here is to address the mental health issue." Abbott has it almost exactly backward. The quick nonsolution is always to talk about mental health. But do people in the United States have 100 times as many mental health problems as they do in the U.K.? The United States has a rate of gun violence 18 times higher than the average rich country. Does that mean it has 18 times the rate of mental disorders? Texas has almost triple the rate of gun deaths as the state of New York — yet Texas doesn't have three times as many mentally ill people as New York.

All these statistics can have the effect of deadening our sensibilities to what is going on in the United States. But let me try one last set to try to jolt us all into awareness. Every day in America, more than 200 people are wounded by guns; 120 are killed by them. Of these 120, 11 are children and teens. The leading cause of mortality among children in America is now death by a gun. The same number of deaths — 120 — will happen tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, every day, until we come to our senses and do something about it.