

GEN Z AND GUN CULTURE

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Abstract

ABSTRACT

Gun violence in the United States presents a multifaceted societal challenge, with nearly 40,000 deaths annually, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. Generation Z, profoundly impacted by experiences such as school shootings and lockdown drills, has emerged as vocal advocates for stricter gun control measures, leveraging social media and grassroots activism. This generational shift is reflected in polling data showing increasing support for gun reform among young Republicans. Legislative efforts, such as the Assault Weapons Ban and red flag laws, aim to address gun violence, but challenges remain, including the lack of representation of Generation Z in government and party divides. Despite obstacles, there is potential for generational realignment on the issue, highlighting the importance of inclusive policy making and advocacy to create a safer and more secure society.



Problem Definition

Gun violence in the United States constitutes a societal challenge, resulting in nearly **40,000** deaths and over **100,000** injuries annually (Pew Research Center, 2023). Rooted in a multitude of factors including lax gun laws, inadequate access to mental health services, and socioeconomic disparities, gun violence poses an obstacle to the creation of a safer and more secure society. Furthermore, gun violence largely impacts marginalized communities. Communities of color and low-income neighborhoods shoulder a larger burden of gun-related incidents, reflecting systemic disparities. Black individuals are **12 times** more likely than white people to die by gun homicide (Everytown Research, n.d.). Addressing these disparities requires a comprehensive approach that prioritizes community engagement, social justice, and policy interventions.

More specifically, there have been roughly **400** school shootings since Columbine on April 20th, 1999. This equates to roughly **360,000** children who have been exposed to gun violence in schools. This has led to **95%** of public schools using lockdown procedures to simulate what to do in the event of a school shooting, a practice that scares children, and **30%** of teens and young adults having personally experienced gun violence or having a friend or family member that has (Rockefeller Institute of Government, n.d.). Having first-hand negative interactions with guns at a young age in situations such as school shootings, scenarios involving gun violence, or being close to people who have experienced gun violence has led **75%** of Generation Z to state that mass shootings are a major source of stress, **72%** say that school shootings are a major source of stress as well as **55%** of Generation Z supporting more restrictive gun laws.



Existing Legislation

The next section will delve into existing and previous legislation that has shaped the debate around gun control and policy. The right to bear arms has dated back to 1791 when it was ratified with the nine other articles of the **Bill of Rights**. While most people know this as the right to bear arms the second amendment details more than just that. It states, "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" (U.S. Const. amend. II). Since the ratification of the second amendment the use and manufacturing of guns has shifted largely and now more legislation is being developed to adapt to navigate the changing field. In 1791, guns required intense training to be used and could only be shot once every 30 seconds whereas today they can be shot roughly 15 times in a matter of seconds (Grace, 2019).

In 1994, the United States Congress passed the **Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act** which is informally known as the assault rifle ban. This law "prohibited the manufacture or sale for civilian use of certain semi-automatic weapons and magazines that could accommodate 10 rounds or more" (Mak, 2019). This has been known as one of the more significant federal gun control measures and its enactment sparked debate about what current and future gun control might look like. During the time that this ban was in place there was a significant decrease in mass shootings, and since it failed to be renewed in 2004, we have seen a resurgence in mass shootings and gun violence related deaths. In 2021, Congressman Cicilline introduced the Assault Weapons Ban Act in the House where it passed with a vote of 217-213. The House then reintroduced the bill this session as the Assault Weapons Ban of 2023 (Sandy Hook Promise, n.d.). Currently, some states including Washington D.C. have enacted legislation to prohibit assault weapons (Everytown for Gun Safety, n.d.).



Existing Legislation

The **Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act**, commonly known as the Brady Act, was enacted in 1993 and implemented in 1994 in the United States. This act mandated federal background checks on firearm purchasers in the United States, as well as a five-day waiting period, providing law enforcement authorities with the opportunity to conduct these background checks (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, n.d.). In nine out of ten states the background checks can be completed within **5** minutes (Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, n.d.). The intention was to prevent individuals with criminal records or mental health issues from easily obtaining firearms, thus reducing gun-related violence and promoting public safety. The main issue with this is that it only references individuals who purchased firearms federally and not those who did them through trade or private sales (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, n.d.).

Red flag laws, also known as **extreme risk protection orders (ERPOs)**, are state-level regulations that allow concerned parties to petition a court to temporarily remove firearms from individuals who pose a risk to themselves or others (American Academy of Pediatrics, n.d.). These laws typically enable the court to issue an order that prohibits the person subject to the petition from possessing firearms for a certain period of time, often ranging from weeks to months, differing per state. The criteria for applying for a court order vary per state but commonly include signs of severe mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, or threatening behavior. Red flag laws aim to prevent gun violence and suicides by temporarily restricting access to firearms for individuals who may pose a danger to themselves or others, while also providing due process protections to the individuals in the community. As of early 2022, several states in the United States have enacted red flag laws, with varying degrees of implementation and enforcement.

Generation Z has started and participated multiple grassroots campaigns to help reduce gun violence and bring attention to the issue.

Most noticeably **March for Our Lives** was created after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida on February 14th, 2018. March for Our Lives was created in hopes of bringing legislation that would limit access to guns and in turn lower the amount of gun violence and shootings that occur in America. Utilizing the accessibility of social media, March for Our Lives has been able to orchestrate numerous large-scale events to bring attention to the call for gun reform by Generation Z (March For Our Lives, n.d.). March for Our Lives has been able to pass **300+** laws in numerous states and mobilize young people to vote.

Another notable Generation Z advocacy movement that has been working towards gun reform and ending gun violence is **Project Unloaded**. Launched in 2022, Project Unloaded hopes to reduce the amount of gun violence that occurs by changing the narrative surrounding gun culture (Project Unloaded, n.d.). Project Unloaded uses social media to spread messages on gun violence and the risks associated with using guns. Project Unloaded has been able to release research on the impact guns have had on members of Generation Z, as well as create councils that are made up of youth in order to advise community partners, design campaigns and conduct research (Project Unloaded, n.d.).

Advocacy Efforts





Comparing Gen Z to Other Generations

While typically strong support for gun ownership has been a conservative ideal, we are seeing more young conservatives in support of background checks and more red flag legislation. This has been a result of so many young individuals' experiences with gun violence. A reoccurring survey with YouGov has shown that Gen Z and Millennial Republicans are more likely to believe in tougher gun laws than their older Republicans and this separation in beliefs has continued to grow (YouGov, 2023). This divide within the party itself is causing concern amongst its politicians as they are already struggling to appeal to young voters (Perez, 2023). Gen Z, voting adults typically identify more liberal with **36%** of them are registered democrats, **30%** independents and **21%** Republican (Axios, 2024).

Overall, one of the conclusions that we can draw from this is that as younger adults reach voting age, stereotypical party ideals and narratives can clash with those of previous party generations. Despite younger Republicans making a shift to stronger gun restrictions, older Republicans' views have remained similar (Perez, 2023). We see this stance on similar issues such as the cause of climate change, racism and same sex marriage; all of which have traditionally been partisan (Pew Research Center, 2020). The shift in party ideals and beliefs poses a challenge as politicians try to navigate the constantly changing landscape. The second conclusion we can draw is that generations and their ideals are shaped by their lived experiences. Across the board Gen Z members have shown to be in more support of gun control legislation than previous generations have been. In a survey of Gen Z members who said they wanted to move out of the United States, **59%** of them cited lack of gun control and high rates of gun violence as the reason (Bregel, 2023). They grew up constantly doing school shooting drills and watching mass shootings weekly on this news, so it shouldn't come as much of a surprise that this is an issue they put value on.

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