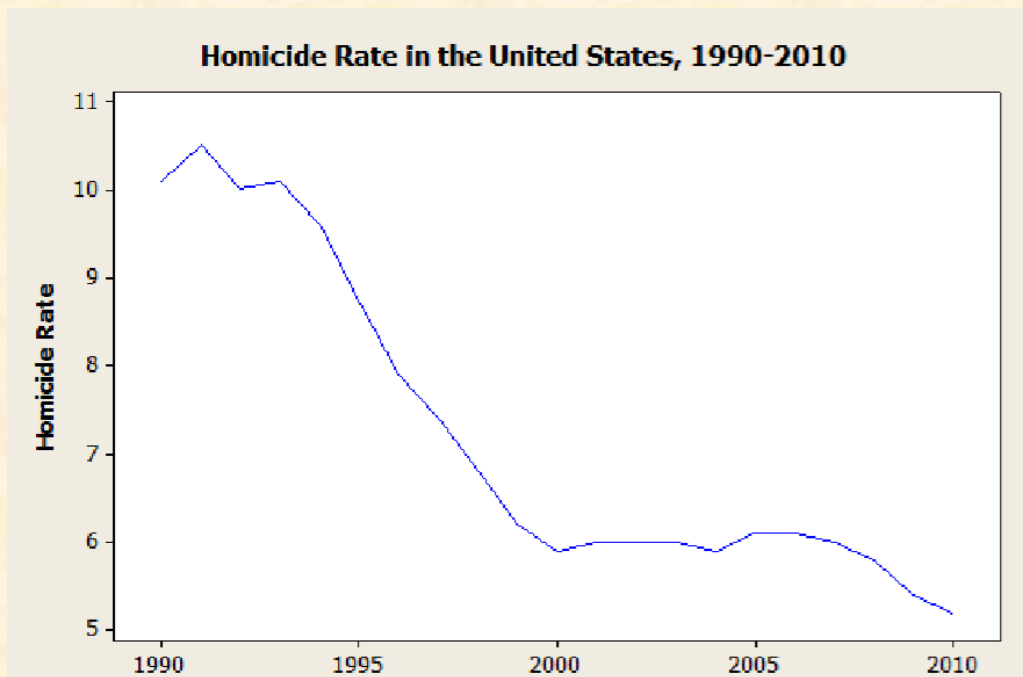


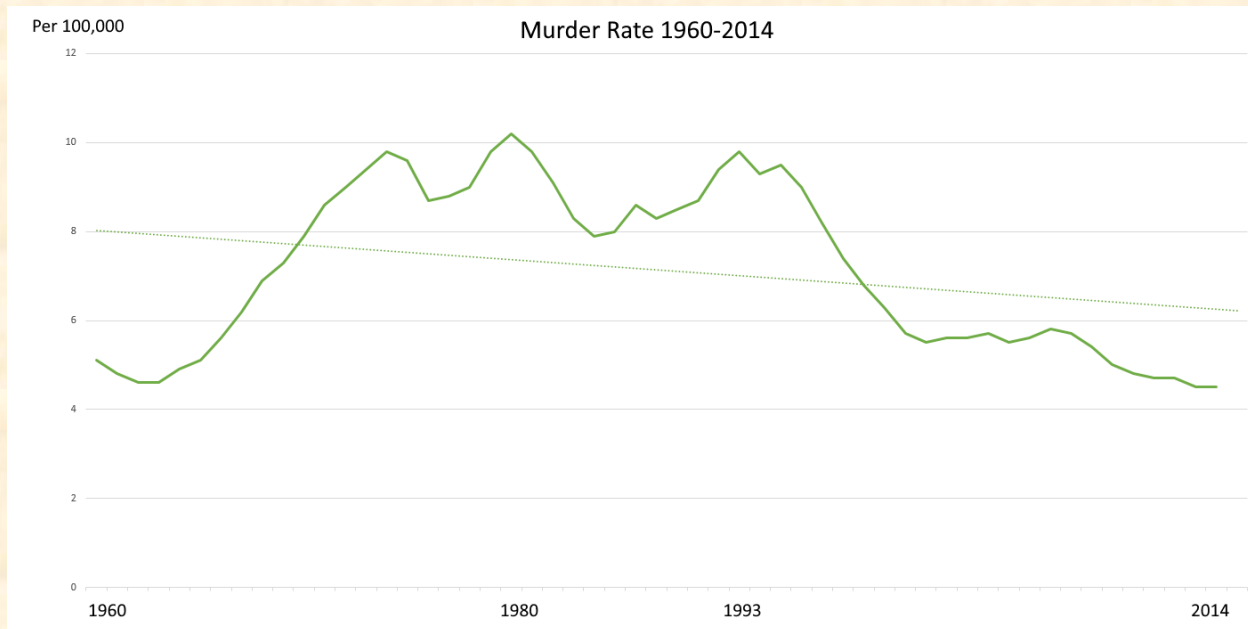
# The Gun Violence “Epidemic”

Even proponents of gun rights frequently accept the fallacy that homicides are on an upward spiral and that mass shootings are on the rise. Neither perception is true, and accepting them at face value is not helpful to any rational discussion of gun violence. While the numbers are incomplete because some states do not fully report, the FBI’s Crime in the United States (“CUIS”) database and analyses are the most reliable source of data on homicides and other violent crimes.

That data shows a consistent *downward* trend in homicides between 1990 and 2014. Homicides peaked in 1980 and again in the early 1990s at a rate of roughly 10 per 100,000 population but have been declining since with only a moderate uptick in recent years. Between 1993 and 2014, homicides per 100,000 declined by approximately 0.2 per year. During the same period, gun ownership in the United States soared. The graph below shows the decline through 2010.



The 2018 CIUS data shows a similar pattern between 1960 and 2014:



Source: <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2018/crime-in-the-u.s.-2018/topic-pages/tables/table-1>

While the 2018 homicide rate of 5.0 per 100,000 has increased slightly from the low of 4.4 per 100,000 in 2014, it is still only half of the 10 per 100,000 rate seen in 1980 and the early 1990s.

When looking solely at homicides *by firearm*, the data shows a similar decline by nearly half between 1993 (7 per 100,000) and 2013 (3.6 per 100,000).

Despite the impression given by the media, the number of mass shooting victims and events also has remained relatively consistent although the number of fatalities in any given year can be widely skewed by one event with a substantial number of victims.

In 2017, *Time Magazine* compiled the number of mass shooting deaths from 1982 to date and has continued to update the compilation. That data from 2001 through 2018 appears below:

	<u>Deaths</u>	<u>Number of Incidents</u>
2018	80	8
2017	117	11
2016	71	6
2015	46	7
2014	17	4
2013	31	5
2012	67	7
2011	18	3
2010	8	1
2009	38	4
2008	16	3
2007	51	4
2006	18	3
2005	16	2
2004	4	1
2003	6	1
2002	0	1
2001	4	1
2001	<u>7</u>	<u>1</u>
	530 Total	73
	27.8 per year	3.84 per year

Source: <https://time.com/4965022/deadliest-mass-shooting-us-history/>

Without minimizing the loss of life or societal cost, it should be noted that years with higher fatality rates were almost always associated with one or two particularly horrific events with a large number of casualties. For example, there were 80 deaths in 2018, but the Parkland School shooting accounted for 17 of those while another 13 were killed in the Thousand Oaks bar shooting and 11 were killed in the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting. Roughly half (58) of the 117 deaths in 2017 were from just one incident - the Las Vegas Concert shooting. The Sutherland Springs shooting accounted for another 26. In 2016, there were 71 fatalities, but the Pules nightclub shooting in Orlando accounted for 49 of those. There were only 46 fatalities in 2015 and 14 of those (a third) were the San Bernardino shooting. At least four of these shootings clearly were racially or ideologically motivated – the Sutherland Springs, Orlando Nightclub, Tree of Life and San Bernardino shootings. Others arguably were as well.

Lightning strikes kill about 100 people annually in the U.S. By contrast, it is a rare year when mass shootings claim more than 100 fatalities and in most years the number is not even close. On a per capita basis, your calculator won't show that many decimal places.

The bottom line is that you have a greater chance of being struck by lightning than you do of being a mass shooting casualty.

Despite these irrefutable facts, the public perception is that homicides and mass shootings are rising and indeed have reached epidemic proportions. Opinion surveys regularly find that Americans believe crime is increasing. Gallup surveys conducted between 1993 and 2018 found that at least six-in-ten Americans believed there was more crime in the U.S. compared with the year before, despite the actual downward trend in violent and property crime rates throughout most of that period.

Pew Research Center surveys have found a similar pattern. A survey conducted in late 2016 showed that 57% of registered voters believed that crime in the U.S. had gotten worse since 2008, despite data showing that violent and property crime rates declined by double-digits percentages during that period.

The reason for this dichotomy almost certainly is agenda driven and sensationalistic "reporting" of firearm related deaths – especially of mass shootings which pose virtually no significant risk to the average person. That perception is reinforced by others with a gun control agenda and even by those who oppose further regulation who tacitly accept this perceived reality as fact rather than correcting the misperception.

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Relying primarily upon the FBI data, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention ("CDC") reported 38,658 firearm related deaths in 2016 [[REF LINK](#)]. That is in a total U.S. population of 323,127,513 and therefore represents an incidence rate of .012%. Of these, only 11,004 or 28.5% were actually homicides. The remaining 71.5% was composed primarily of suicides (roughly 23,000 or 59.5%), with the remainder consisting of accidental discharge deaths, shootings by law enforcement, justifiable shootings in self-defense and deaths which could not clearly be categorized such as those where it could not be determined whether a death was accidental or a suicide.



Of the 11,004 homicides, a significant percentage were concentrated in three (3) major cities which also happen to have some of the most strict gun control laws in the nation.

687 of them (6.25%) were in Chicago;

275 of them (2.50%) were in Baltimore; and

248 of them (2.25%) were in Detroit. **Note**

In other words, 1,210 or 11% of the 11,004 homicides occurred in just three (3) US cities, all of which have strict gun laws. That leaves 9,794 homicides for the entire remainder of the nation but even that is misleading as some states have more than their share of gun homicides. California, for example had 1,368 of the homicides in 2016; 12.4% of the total. And like Chicago, Baltimore and Detroit, California has very strict gun laws. If you subtract the California gun homicides, you are left with just 8,426 to allocate among the remaining 49 states; roughly 172 per state if you divide them equally.

Remember, however, that a substantial percentage of those remaining homicides – at least 30% – involve gang on gang or drug related violence between criminals, and are unlikely to directly impact the average law abiding American. As a result, the “epidemic” of gun related homicides is more like 70% of the remaining 8,426 or **a total of 5898 homicides** – at least if you do not live in California or one of the three cities referenced above. That translates into an incidence rate of .00183 percent.

Excluding suicides from the total is not intended to diminish the significance or tragedy of those events. Indeed, while firearms are used in only a small minority of suicide attempts, their effectiveness means they account for nearly half of all deaths by suicide. Because suicide can be an impulsive decision, ready access to a firearm can be problematic. On the other hand, people generally do not kill themselves with AR-15 rifles or other “assault weapons” and homicides must be the primary focus in any discussion of gun violence and regulation. While the number of accidental shooting deaths per year is actually quite small (less than 500 in most years per CDC data), many are preventable with good firearm handling practices, making the grief they cause all the more senseless. Again, however, regulatory efforts directed at the purchase and sale of firearms would not alter the outcome. Every new firearm now sold in this country comes with a trigger lock or similar safety device and owners must take responsibility for the safe handling and securing of their firearms.

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To put the 8,426 (or 11,004) gun homicide number in context, consider the 200,000 plus who die each year from preventable medical errors. Or the 35,000 plus per year that die in traffic accidents, over 3,000 of whom die as a direct result of “distracted driving”; i.e. as a result of someone driving while texting or otherwise not paying attention.

It has long been recognized that hospitals and doctor’s offices may be hazardous to our health, but not just in the ways that we typically think. Studies as early as 1999 recognized that medical errors caused or contributed to as many as 98,000 preventable deaths each year. As better data developed over the years, more recent publications estimate as many as 250,000 to 400,000 preventable deaths are caused by medical errors each and every year. If medical error was a disease, it would be the third leading cause of death in the U.S. just behind heart disease and cancer. Makary M. A., Medical error—the third leading cause of death in the US, *BMJ* 353:i2139 (2016). Accepting only the lower end of the estimate, we are talking about a quarter of a million preventable deaths – more than 22 times the total number of firearm homicides per year. A mere 10% decrease in those deaths would save more than DOUBLE the lives lost to firearm homicides each year. Yet there is no clamor for increased oversight and regulation of the medical profession. In fact, the reverse is true with repeated calls for tort reform to protect healthcare providers from any effort to hold them responsible and to limit the rights of those who have been victimized by such errors.

Motor vehicles cause a similar number of deaths as firearms and over three times the number of firearm related homicides. In 2015, there were a total of 32,166 vehicular crashes in the United States resulting in 35,092 deaths. Traffic Safety Facts Research Note, U.S. Dept. of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration DOT HS 812 381 (March 2017) [[REF LINK](#)]. Of those fatal accidents, 3,196 involved “distracted driving”, and in 442 of them use of a cell phone was the reported distraction. *Id.* In addition to those deaths, an estimated 30,000 injuries were attributed to cell phone caused distractions in 2015. *Id.* It also must be remembered that these figures represent only hard data where cell phone use was proven or admitted by the driver. The actual incidence rate undoubtedly was far higher and likely approached the firearm homicide rate.

We could go on. A 2004 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* evaluated various preventable causes of death in the U.S. for the

year 2000. The study found that tobacco was the leading cause of preventable death, causing 435,000 or 18% of all preventable deaths that year. Obesity and physical inactivity were not far behind at 400,000 or 16.6% of preventable deaths. Alcohol abuse was next with 85,000 or 3.5% of preventable deaths. Firearm related deaths, including suicides, ranked far below several other causes at 28,663 or 1.2% of preventable deaths. Mokdad A.H., "Actual causes of death in the United States, 2000", JAMA 291 (10): 1238–45 (March 2004) [[REF LINK](#)]. According to the CDC, 115 Americans die each day from a drug overdose. There were 63,600 drug overdose deaths in 2016, 66% of which (42,000) involved an opioid drug [[REF LINK](#)].

While all deaths are tragic, perspective matters and that is especially true where legislative and regulatory policy and resources are concerned (See this [LINK](#)). When viewed in context with other causes of death, the term "Epidemic" cannot fairly or rationally be applied to 8,426 deaths, 11004 deaths, or even 38,658 deaths resulting from the use/misuse of firearms.

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**Author Note:** Like many young men growing up in the rural South, the author owned a .22 caliber rifle and a shotgun, both of which were used for hunting and sport shooting. He no longer hunts and has passed the .22 rifle on to his son, but he still owns firearms for recreation and personal defense. He is not a member of the NRA and has no vested interest in the gun debate, but is tired of hearing heated arguments presented on both sides of the issue without bothering to learn the facts.