



Assault Weapons: What They Really Are and Understanding Efforts to Ban Them

Assault weapons are used in about 25% of all mass shootings, and these shootings have many more casualties. When these weapons are used, an average of 2.3 times more people are killed and 22.7 times more people are wounded.

These lethal weapons are the core of the United States gun debate. Some major city [*police chiefs characterize these guns as "weapons of war"*](#) that do not belong in hands outside of the military or police.

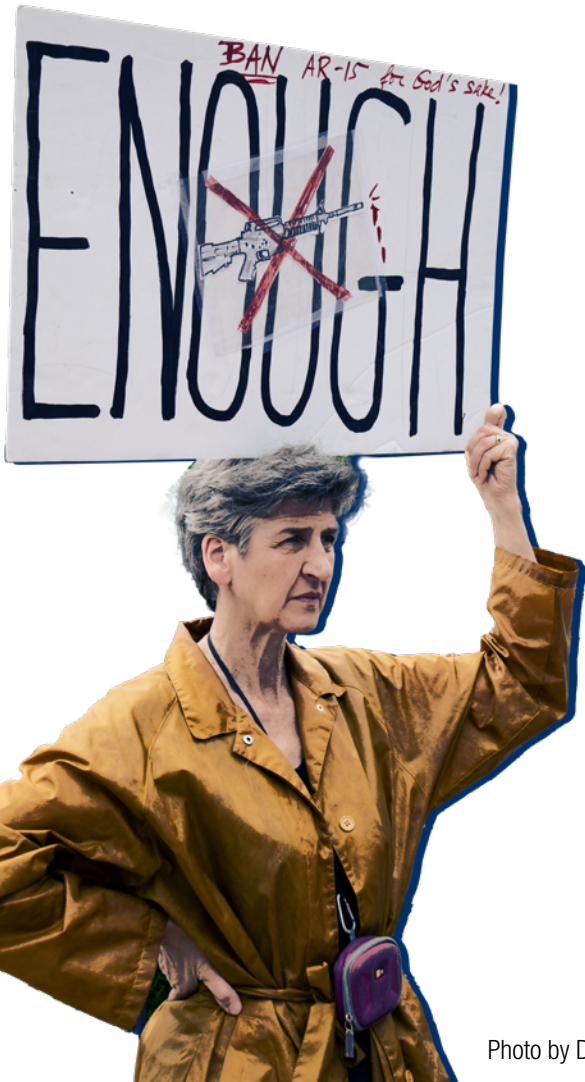
What Are Assault Weapons?

Assault Weapons are semi-automatic guns designed for military use and quick, efficient killing. They are uniquely lethal because of their rapid rate of fire and high muzzle velocity. Semi-automatic means when the shooter pulls the trigger, one bullet is fired, and a new bullet is automatically loaded.

This allows a shooter to rapidly keep pulling the trigger, shooting many bullets in a short time. For example, the person who carried out the Sandy Hook shooting fired [*154 bullets in less than four minutes*](#), killing 26 people.

The most common assault weapon is the AR-15 style rifle. The original AR-15 was made by gun manufacturer ArmaLite (hence the "AR"), now part of Colt. The AR-15 as emerged as a prototype with many manufacturers making similar weapons under many names like Bushmaster. These are referred to collectively as AR-15 style.

They are designed to have replaceable parts so users can customize various features like grips, magazines, sights and more. There are also semi-automatic handguns that are assault weapons and can use high-capacity magazines.



In 2019, according to gun industry figures, 48% of all rifles (and 11% of all guns) made or imported into the US were assault weapons. In 2020 alone, the United States made or imported [2.8 million assault rifles](#). The gun industry calls assault rifles modern sports rifles or MSRs. We are concerned about the increasing proliferation of these weapons because of the greater numbers of casualties that accompany their use as noted above.

What Are High-Capacity Magazines?

Shooters with assault weapons often use high-capacity magazines, which offer excessively high ammunition storage for a firearm. High-capacity magazines generally hold greater than 10 rounds of ammunition with AR-15s often holding 30 rounds. (Some states define high-capacity as greater than 15 rounds.)

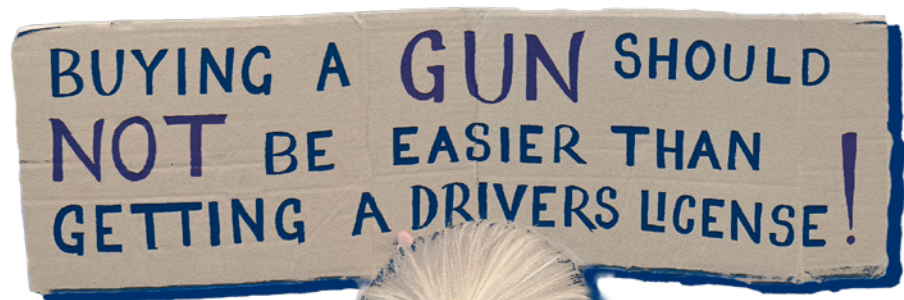
These allow a shooter to fire many more shots without stopping to reload. Reloading time often creates the opportunity to stop a shooter, but high-capacity magazines lessen the frequency of such pauses. Banning assault weapons with high-capacity magazines can save lives. Many states have taken this stand, and the U.S. federal government must follow suit.

Wasn't There Once a Federal Ban on Assault Weapons?

In 1994, a federal ban on assault weapons was enacted as a subsection of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 and signed into law by President Bill Clinton. To get enough votes to pass, it included a "sunset provision," such that the ban would automatically expire after 10 years unless renewed by a vote of Congress.

During the 10 years the assault weapon ban was in effect, [mass shootings decreased 37% and the resulting fatalities dropped 43%](#). Law enforcement has long supported laws prohibiting assault weapons because they are effectively being "outgunned" by militarized civilians and criminals with easy access to assault weapons and large-capacity magazines. Thus, assault weapons in public hands are a factor in "militarizing" police departments.

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Haven't Some States Acted While the Federal Government Has Not?

Ten states and the District of Columbia have banned assault weapons. The latest is the state of Washington, which passed the legislation on April 19, 2023. The other states with assault weapon bans are: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York.

Has Federal Legislation Been Introduced?

In 2023, the House ([H.R. 698](#)) and the Senate ([S. 25](#)) have introduced the Assault Weapons Ban of 2023. The bill criminalizes the importing, selling, manufacturing, transferring, or possessing of a semiautomatic assault weapon or large capacity magazine. The proposal permits continued possession, sale, or transfer of a grandfathered weapon, which must be securely stored. A licensed gun dealer must conduct a background check prior to the sale or transfer of a grandfathered weapon. It also allows a state or local government to use a federal grant program to compensate individuals who surrender a banned weapon under a buy-back program.

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