

Increasing numbers of Americans support gun background checks

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Credit: Lukas from Pexels

In the aftermath of the shootings in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, public debate once again turned to what Congress should do to reduce gun violence.

One of the challenges that many policymakers face is understanding the views of the general public. Policymakers tend to be most concerned about the magnitude and intensity of the opposition to stricter gun regulation.

In late 2016, [my research team surveyed 1,115 adults](#) twice, six months apart. We discovered that the number of Americans [supporting stricter background checks](#) for gun purchases is growing, and it is growing most among people who previously opposed or were neutral about such regulation.

Views on guns, six months apart

We asked respondents whether they remembered nine specific acts or attempted acts of violence targeting large numbers of people in the U.S., from the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in 2012 up to the [bombings in New York and New Jersey in 2016](#).

Five of these events occurred before the first survey; four occurred between the first and second surveys.

We had two theories as to how Americans' opinions on guns might have changed in the intervening six months.

First, as these violent events continue to occur, the general public might become inured to acts of mass violence, including shootings, and to consider them to be the "new normal." In this scenario, we would expect support for public policies to address gun violence would diminish.

Events in study

	Event	Time
1	Sandy Hook Elementary School	December 2012
2	Boston Marathon	April 2013
3	Charleston, SC church	June 2015
4	Colorado Springs Planned Parenthood	November 2015
5	San Bernardino, CA	December 2015
	<i>First survey conducted</i>	May 2016
6	Orlando, FL nightclub	June 2016
7	Dallas, TX police shooting	July 2016
8	Baton Rouge, LA police shooting	July 2016
9	Bombings and attempted bombings in New York and New Jersey	September 2016
	<i>Second survey conducted</i>	November 2016

Alternatively, there might be a cumulative effect, where people eventually get to the point of saying that enough is enough. In this scenario, support for gun-control policies should go up.

We asked about levels of support for, or opposition to, a number of policy proposals, including stricter [background checks](#) for all gun purchases, sales bans on assault-style weapons, enhanced [airport security](#) and expanded high-tech digital surveillance.

Who changed their minds

[As reported in other surveys](#), U.S. support for stricter background checks is high.

Federal law currently requires only commercial purchasers of guns to be cleared through the National Instant Criminal Background Check System. Private sales of guns and sales of guns at gun shows are not covered by the federal law, although [15 states have stricter requirements](#). Stricter background checks would include requiring the buyers of all guns to be cleared before a purchase could be completed.

In our first survey, a little over 70% of the people said they "strongly supported" or "somewhat supported" stricter checks. In the second survey, six months later, that number rose to nearly 75%.

We saw a remarkable amount of stability in people's views on background checks. Nearly two-thirds of the people interviewed reported the exact same views at both points in time.

But some people did change their opinions. Between the first and second survey, there was a clear tendency for individual people's positions to move incrementally toward supporting background checks.

Changing views on background checks

Researchers asked people what they thought of specific gun control policies, then asked them the same question six months later. A significant proportion of people who were opposed to background checks had changed their minds between the two surveys.

In the first survey, 118 people were strongly or somewhat opposed to background checks. Six months later, of that group...



In the first survey, 804 people were strongly or somewhat supportive of background checks. Six months later, of that group...



Among those who "strongly opposed" stricter checks, only 46% still strongly opposed them six months later.

Of the 118 people who strongly or somewhat opposed stricter background checks in the first survey, over 20% changed to say they were supportive six months later. Of those who neither supported nor opposed background checks at first, a third shifted to be supportive.

Very few people reported views moving toward being more opposed. Of the 804 people who supported background checks at first, only about 10% shifted to neither support nor oppose, or to oppose, six months later.

Shootings' cumulative effect

Clearly, support for stricter background checks has increased over the six months we studied, even among many of those who might have been previously uneasy with such checks.

This pattern is reflected in changes toward other policy options, including banning assault-style weapons, although background checks have gained the most support.

Our work offers a glimpse into how individuals in the U.S. have changed their opinions on gun control. Many surveys capture a moment in time, but don't show who is changing or in what direction.

Based on the information from this study, there would seem to be something of a cumulative effect gradually moving people toward realizing the need for policy intervention.

Strong public support for gun legislation has not been translated into congressional action in the past. Evidence presented here and in national polls suggests that support has never been stronger than it is right now. Of course, whether these changes usher in a new era of efforts in Congress or the states to stem [gun violence](#) remains to be seen.

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