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The Issue of Gun Violence in the 2020 Presidential Election

Gun violence in the United States has become an increasingly significant topic, dominating the news and sparking intense partisan debate. 33,594 people were killed by guns in the United States in 2016 alone and an average of 96 Americans die by firearms every day, according to the CDC. America is ranked 20th in the world for firearm death rate and 2nd behind Brazil for total gun deaths. According to a 2010 World Health Organization study, Americans are ten times more likely to be killed by guns than people in other developed countries. These shocking statistics and political disagreement over gun control makes gun violence a significant issue in the upcoming 2020 presidential election.

Of the 33,594 gun deaths in 2016, nearly two thirds were suicides (22,938), making this the largest category of overall gun deaths in the United States (CDC). According to Everytown Research, access to a gun increases the risk of death by suicide by three times, with gun suicides in the United States concentrated in states with high rates of gun ownership. Additionally, the gun suicide rate in the United States is eight times that of other high-income countries. This makes gun suicides an important factor to consider in the United States's overall gun deaths, especially when compared to other high-income countries.

An additional 14,415 gun deaths in 2016 were classified as homicides. Gun homicides in the US are concentrated in cities, with half of all gun homicides taking place in just 127 American cities. These numbers are especially surprising when compared to those of other

developed countries worldwide. The US gun homicide rate is 25 times that of other high-income countries (Everytown). America also has the highest rate of gun related killings as a percent of overall homicides at 64% compared to 30.5%, 13%, and 4.5% in Canada, Australia, and England (BBC).

An additional portion of American gun deaths are a result of mass shootings. While mass shootings account for a tiny fraction of overall gun deaths (71 of 33,594 gun deaths in 2016), they have a huge impact. The Washington Post defines mass shootings as shootings in which four or more people are killed, not including shootings tied to gang disputes, robberies, or domestic shootings in private homes. According to their study, there have been 157 public mass shootings in the United States since 1966, involving 1,123 victims and 161 shooters.

According to Crime Prevention Research Center researcher John Lott's study of mass shooting incidents in the United States and Europe, the United States ranks 11th for mass shootings when measured by death rate per million population (from 2009-2015). The United States falls behind many developed European countries such as Norway, Serbia, France, and Finland (Investors). Additionally, there were 27% more casualties per mass shooting in the European Union than the United States from 2009-2015, according to the same report. When measured against the entire world, Lott's study ranked the United States at 56th per capita for rate of attacks.

While there are many factors contributing to such gun violence, America's gun culture often stands out. Despite making up only 5% of the world's population, Americans own nearly 50% of all civilian guns worldwide (BBC), and Americans own more guns per capita than any other country, according to a 2007 Small Arms Survey. Additionally, about 40% of American

people say they own a gun or live in a household with one, according to a 2017 survey by Pew Research Center.

Americans are also incredibly divided over policies related to guns, with 39% of Americans satisfied with gun control laws and 54% not satisfied, according to Gallup (BBC). Several issues related to gun policy are particularly divided along political party lines. The largest disagreements surround support for an assault weapons ban (81% of Democrats, 50% of Republicans) and even more so on two other proposals: arming teachers and school officials and allowing people to carry concealed weapons in more places. However, there are a few areas of bipartisan support. In particular, the overwhelming majority of both Republicans and Democrats favor restricting access to guns for the mentally ill and those on watch lists (“Gun”).

The current democratic candidates propose a range of progressive leaning gun control reforms. Cory Booker, saying he has "the most comprehensive gun violence prevention plan of any candidate for president in decades," proposes a mandatory federal government gun license for all gun owners. Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, and Julian Castro have all expressed support for buyback programs. Elizabeth Warren alternatively focuses her plan on reducing the power of the NRA while increasing funding toward gun safety research and reducing gun deaths in the country by 80%. Every democratic candidate supports universal background checks and a ban on assault weapons (Haslett).

Opponents of gun control argue that such policies would be ineffective and infringe on 2nd amendment constitutional rights. They point to evidence such as rising murder rates in the UK after banning handguns in 1997 and a 2009 mass shooting in Germany despite strict gun laws (“Ten”). Conservatives also argue that any form of gun control is a gateway to further

limiting constitutional rights and that assault weapons provide a defense against oppressive government or foreign military power. Further arguments against the effectiveness of gun control also include the fact that criminals will still have access to guns (with one gun for every citizen in the US already) and that laws don't apply to criminals ("Ten").

The decisiveness of the issue will likely play a significant role in the decisions of voters in the upcoming presidential election. Colleen Barry, professor at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, says that recent mass shootings will lead to "more gun regulation related political advertising in this election cycle than we have seen in the past" and accelerate the shift to gun policy campaigning among Democrats (Kim).

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