

Assault Weapons: Common Misconceptions

“These are machine guns or automatic weapons.”

Nope, the confusion comes from the fact that “assault rifle” [means](#) “ a military rifle capable of both automatic and semiautomatic fire, utilizing an intermediate-power cartridge.”

The gun control movement coined the term “assault weapon” to refer to guns, usually semiautomatic rifles, that share some parts and appearance with “assault rifles” much like the [Chevrolet](#) NASCAR race cars looks something like [the Chevrolet SS street car](#) and share some parts.

“But they are easy to convert to full auto.”

A recurring claim is that semiauto firearms are easily converted to full automatic. [Federal law already defines machinegun this way:](#)

The term “machinegun” means any weapon which shoots, is designed to shoot, or can be readily restored to shoot, automatically more than one shot, without manual reloading, by a single function of the trigger. The term shall also include the frame or receiver of any such weapon, any part designed and intended solely and exclusively, or combination of parts designed and intended, for use in converting a weapon into a machinegun, and any combination of parts from which a machinegun can be assembled if such parts are in the possession or under the control of a person. [26 USC 5845(b)]

Any semiautomatic firearm which can be “readily restored” is *already* a machinegun. If you have the parts to do this conversion and a gun for which those parts can be used to do this conversion, it is already a machinegun, subject to the much stricter licensing requirements of machineguns.

In a few cases, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms has [declared a few existing semiautomatic firearms to be machine guns under existing law because they were too easy to convert](#) [27 Code of Federal Regulations §179.11, ATF Rul. 82-3, 82-8, 83-5, and 81-4] Pretty obviously any firearm being sold today over the counter at a gun store or gun show is not readily convertible to automatic.

“These are especially deadly weapons, designed for warfare.”

Most rifles currently used for hunting were originally designed for war, including all bolt action rifles ([all descendants of the Mauser](#)), and lever action rifles ([descended from the Henry, developed for the Civil War](#)).

The cartridge used in the AR-15 and AK-47 semiauto rifles are actually low powered compared to hunting rifles. The [.223 has 1495 foot-pounds of energy](#). The 7.62x39mm used in [AK-47s has 1653 foot-pounds](#). The .30-06 commonly used for hunting in North America has [3356 foot-pounds of energy](#).

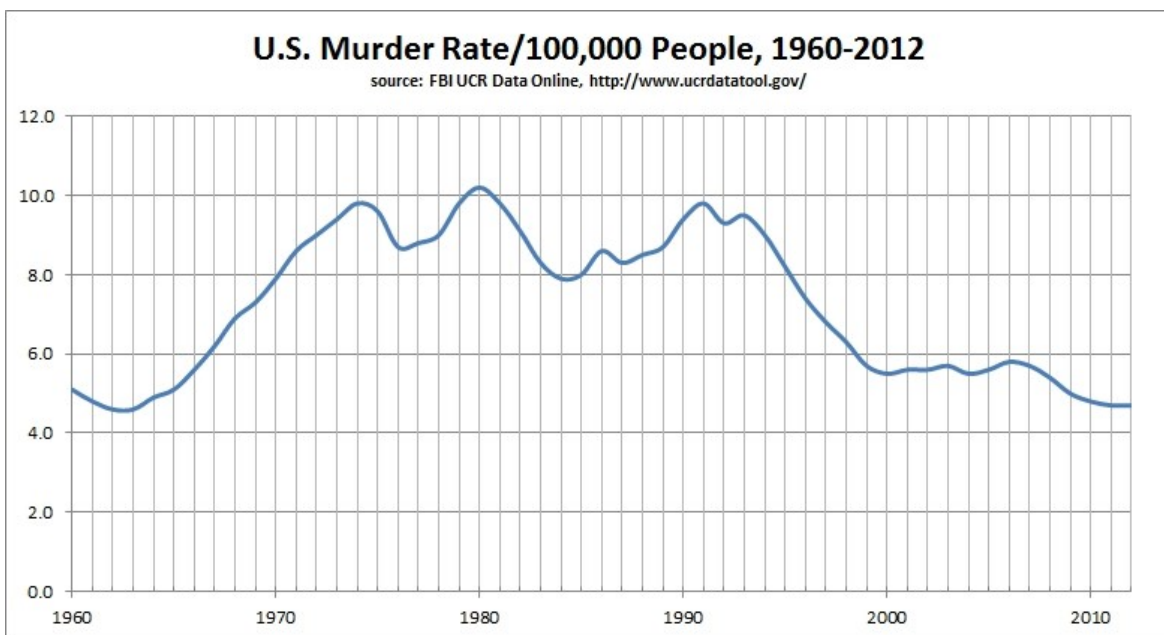
“They are commonly used for mass murder in the U.S.”

USA Today several years ago created [a database of mass murder incidents from 2006-2013](#). Surprisingly, [23% of mass murders do not involve a gun of any sort](#). Often these are mass murder by arson, sometimes by knife. [Of the 77% involving guns “72.9% were handguns.” Rifles \(including the much feared AR-15\) were 18.5%; shotguns were 8.6%.](#) Only 8.6% of the gun mass murders were with semiautomatic rifles, which includes many quite [ordinary hunting rifles](#).



“But these are the reason for the dramatic increase in murder rates.”

Murder rates in the U.S. have been falling for a couple of decades. The following graph shows murder rates/100,000 population since 1960 from the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports system.



“So why is everyone making a big deal about assault weapons?”

Because panic is an effective way to pass laws that calmer reflection might not pass. [Mass murders are about 1% of all U.S. murders](#). Not all that common, but worthy of concern, and great for news coverage which operates on the motto, “If it bleeds, it leads.” It turns out that common factors in these incidents are (in the last few years) Islamic terrorist attacks and [the destruction of the state mental health systems in the 1960s and 1970s](#), which is why this did not *used* to be a big problem, but now is.

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