

# Why are there more and more guns in America? Blame Fox News

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*Why do Americans buy guns? For many, it's because they are worried that new gun control measures may stop them from buying guns in the future. **Dan Cassino** examines the role of the news media – specifically Fox and network news, in driving Americans' fears about gun control. He finds that while mass shootings do lead to an increase in gun sales – as measured by the number of background checks – coverage of gun control measures by Fox leads to far more. He writes that in the wake of the Sandy Hook shootings in 2012, for example, coverage of gun control by Fox News led to an additional 1.9 million background checks.*

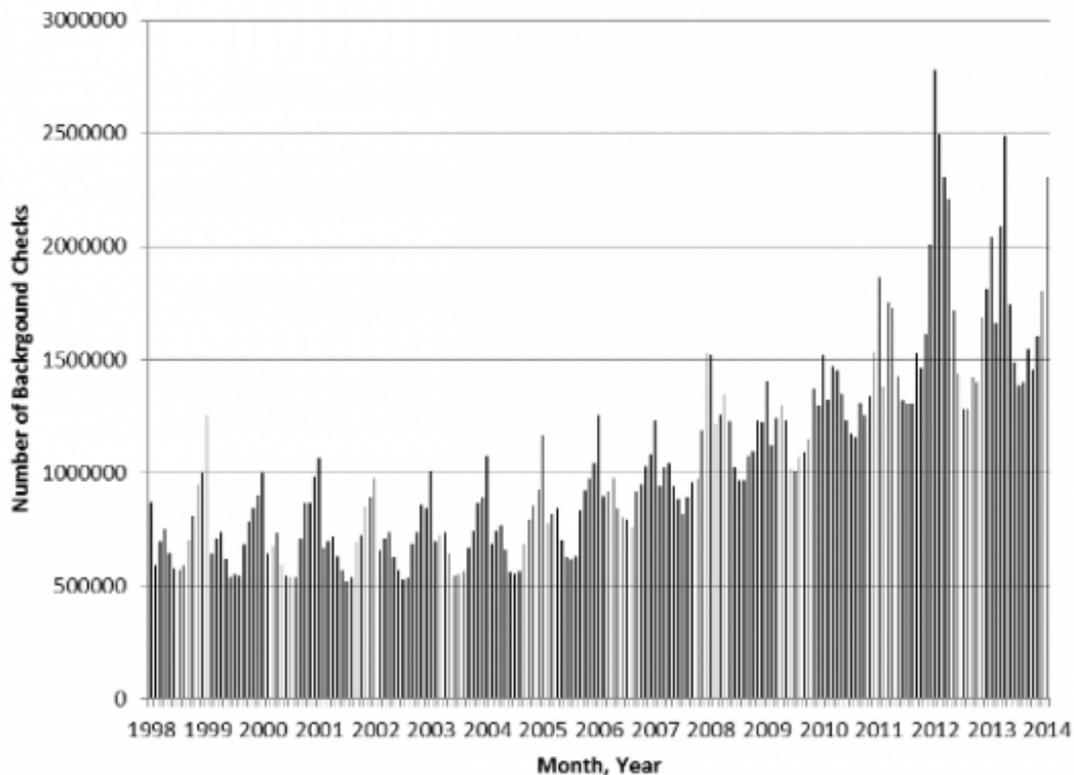


There are a lot of reasons why Americans buy firearms, but one of the main reasons is the concern that gun control is, this time, really going to happen, and it's necessary to buy guns now, because you won't be able to later. Why would Americans think this? Perhaps because the news media, and Fox News in particular, are saying it. The possibility of gun control may make for good ratings, but it's also directly responsible for millions of additional gun sales in America over the past few years.

While there's no central database on which Americans own guns, or how many they own, Americans who buy firearms from licensed dealers are required to undergo a background check, and the FBI keeps track of how many background checks are carried out, and when. The number of background checks tends to underestimate the number of sales, but it's the best data available.

Using data from the 200 months between the start of the FBI background check reporting in 1998 and when the data was compiled (shown in Figure 1 below), it's possible to identify the trends in the number of background checks, and identify the causes of variation in the number of background checks. During the Clinton presidency, there were about 750,000 checks per month, a tally which rose to about 800,000 purchases per month during Bush's two terms. Gun sales in America didn't really take off until President Obama won the 2008 election. In September 2008, there were 973,000 firearm sales through dealers. In the month after Obama won the election, that number rose to 1.2 million, then 1.5 million for the next two months. Prior to Obama's election, the most checks ever recorded in a month was less than 1.3 million. Since Obama took office, there have been an average of 1.5 million background checks per month.

**Figure 1 – Background checks by month, 1998-2014**



Once we control for relevant factors like seasonality (sales go up in September and December), and the general trend of increasing sales over time, we can use data from media content analysis to determine the effects of Fox News coverage and other media sources on gun sales.

Over the period for which full content analysis of gun control coverage is available (42 months), Fox News had an average of 20 statements a month about gun control (the networks averaged 26) but much of that was driven by the debate over gun control after the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary in December, 2012. In the month after the shooting, gun control was discussed 226 times on Fox, and 321 times on the network evening news broadcasts. Of course, it isn't fair to just look at the number of times gun control was discussed: Americans could be arming themselves in order to protect themselves from mass shootings. As such, the data also controls for the number of times mass shootings were discussed in the news.

As might be expected, the shootings at Sandy Hook led to an increase in the number of background checks, independent of media coverage, with an estimated effect of 380,000 additional sales. These effects are dwarfed, however, by the effects of coverage of gun control. While discussions of mass shootings in the media had no effect on the number of background checks, statements about gun control, once they exceed ten in a month, have an enormous impact that's conditional on the media source, and how popular Obama is at the moment. Despite the fact that the network news broadcasts have a far larger audience than Fox News, statements about gun control on the evening news don't matter, but statements on Fox News do. Controlling for all other factors, when Obama's approval is low (41 percent), coverage of gun control above the threshold on Fox leads to 878,000 more background checks in the following month than would be expected if there were minimal coverage of gun control. While that seems like a lot, the same coverage would be expected to increase the number of background checks by 1.8 million in the following month if Obama had high levels of approval (53 percent).

All told, coverage of gun control on Fox led to an additional 1.9 million background checks in the three months following the Sandy Hook shootings, and millions more over the course of Obama's term in office. Those background checks, of course, represent far more than 2 million additional guns, though we don't know exactly how many. Any coverage of gun control on Fox leads to additional sales, but when Obama is popular – and perceived to be able to actually do something about gun control – the effects go through the roof. Fox News is telling people that

Obama is about to take their guns away, and America has millions more guns on the streets because of it.

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## About the author

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