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What is an Assault Weapon?

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Abstract

Looking at various definitions of an “assault weapon” in a number of proposed or enacted national and state bans, we apply the legislative criteria to test which small arms available to American consumers would fit. Of 199 models of centerfire rifles with semiautomatic firing advertised in a 2019 mass market gun magazine, we find that roughly 70-85% would meet the criteria. In contrast, at most 15% of the semiautomatic shotguns and only 1.5% of the semiautomatic pistols would meet ban criteria (as a percentage of all rifles, shotguns and handguns the rough figures would be 20%, 5% and 1% respectively). We also analyze the frequency with which legislatively designated “assault weapons” traits show up among those that meet ban criteria, and use firearms reference material to assess each trait for potential effect on lethality and concealability. The majority of guns meeting the assault weapon criteria combine the traits of detachable magazines, semiautomatic firing capability and intermediate power cartridges which have been classified by the NRA as “modern sporting rifles.” It is not clear empirically how well these weapons fit into the two standard justifications of civilian firearms ownership of hunting or self-defense, but this quantitative analysis of legislative policy effects may help to frame the discussion.