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# Fact-Check: The Gun Lobby Claims Assault Weapons Are No More Dangerous Than Hunting Rifles. The Human Body Begs To Differ.

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Opponents of gun control don't like to talk about assault weapons. Even the terminology itself is so controversial that the gun industry and many within the pro-gun community refuse to acknowledge that such a class of weapons exists, claiming that the term 'assault weapon' was invented by gun control advocates, and that the high capacity semi-automatic rifles that have become the weapons of choice in mass shootings are no different than the hunting rifles used by your grandpa. But while the anti-gun-control crowd may buy into the myth that assault weapons are not functionally different than other firearms, the human body is not fooled so easily. Today, we'll look at this popular anti-gun-control talking-point and compare it to the scientific and medical evidence on gunshot wounds.

## The Claim: Military-Style Assault Weapons Only *Look* Deadly

According to the gun lobby and their media spokespersons, the very idea of an 'assault weapon' is a mythical concept invented by proponents of gun control. As Fox News contributor Katie Pavlich, who writes about gun policy for the conservative Townhall website, put it, "the term 'assault weapon' is a made up political term." Or, in the words of NRA News host Cam Edwards, the term assault weapon is "a made up phrase" that can be defined as "gun I'm trying to ban" or "gun I want to ban." But as Media Matters thoroughly documented in a 2013 report:

*The truth is that military-style semi-automatic rifles were called assault weapons because that is what gun manufacturers and gun enthusiasts called them. The term has played a key role in the ongoing effort of the gun industry to rebrand and market military-style weaponry to civilians. Now, as legislation supported by a majority of Americans has been proposed to ban these weapons, the NRA and its gun industry and media allies are using semantics and terminology arguments to downplay the dangers of a class of weapons often associated with horrific mass shootings and law enforcement killings.*

Indeed, after Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton released her proposals for gun reform earlier this week, anti-gun-control advocates were quick to respond with a series of falsehoods meant to discredit Clinton's gun safety plan. Though Clinton's proposals focused primarily on closing gun sale and transfer loopholes, establishing universal background checks, and regulating firearms dealers, some opponents nonetheless zeroed on in her mention of support for an assault weapons ban — the same type of ban that Republican Presidents Gerald Ford, George H.W. Bush, and Ronald Reagan all explicitly supported. In voicing their disapproval for Clinton's plan to reduce gun deaths and injuries, anti-gun-control advocates have consistently denied that high-capacity, military-style weapons are any more dangerous than a typical hunting rifle.

This was the argument made on Tuesday by Fox News' judicial analyst Andrew Napolitano, who falsely claimed on *Fox & Friends* that the only difference between an assault weapon and other firearms is "some plastic stuff on there" and that "it has nothing to do with the frequency with which bullets come out." John Lott, whose gun-industry-backed research has been publicly discredited multiple times, makes the same argument in his ~~paranoid rant~~ book, *At the Brink: Will Obama Push Us Over the Edge?*, claiming that the firearms used in the Aurora, Colorado, and Newtown, Connecticut shootings only bear a "cosmetic resemblance" to military-style weapons and are actually no more dangerous than a typical "small-game hunting rifle." The civilian versions of these military-style weapons, Lott writes, "use the same sort of bullet as small-game hunting rifles, fire with the same rapidity (one bullet per trigger-pull), and inflict the same damage."

## The Evidence: Assault Weapons Fire More Powerful Rounds – At A Faster Rate – Than Small-Game Hunting Rifles, Resulting In Devastating Internal Injuries

Data from the firearms industry shows that there are far more than "cosmetic differences" at play here. According to firearms manufacturer Ruger, the popular Remington brand .22 Rimfire ammunition commonly used for small-game hunting has a muzzle velocity between 700 and 2000 feet per second. Similarly, top-selling ammunition brand Hornady reports that the ammunition available for a .45 caliber handgun fires at a muzzle velocity of no more than 1,055 feet per second. The .223 ammunition most often used by the AR-15 assault weapon, however, can achieve a velocity of 4,000 feet per second. Some AR-15s are designed to accept 5.56 NATO ammunition, a similar round to the .223 that has a velocity of up to 3,130 feet per second.

Why does muzzle velocity matter? According to a 2011 report by a team of doctors who had performed autopsies on soldiers killed by gunfire in Iraq, "The velocity of the round as it strikes the target is the main determinant of the wounding capacity" and "[t]he greater energy of the round at the moment of

impact the greater is the tissue destruction.” Indeed, the study found that rounds with a velocity exceeding 2,500 feet per second cause a shockwave to pass through the body upon impact, inflicting catastrophic injuries even in areas remote to the direct wound.

Dr. David Newman, the director of clinical research in the department of emergency medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, has seen firsthand the devastation caused by high-muzzle velocity weapons. As a trauma surgeon with 14 years of experience working in Level 1 Trauma Centers plus a 2005 deployment to a combat hospital near Baghdad, Dr. Newman has witnessed just about every kind of traumatic injury imaginable, including plenty of gunshot wounds. In a recent interview with *The Trace*, he was asked whether it mattered what type of gun a victim was shot with. His answer: “It matters a great deal.”

Dr. Newman discussed the nature of various gunshot injuries, explaining that small caliber guns produce wounds that are visibly smaller, while shotgun wounds tend to be more visually striking. “But,” he said, “the worst is a wound from an AR-15 or AK-47 — high-muzzle velocity weapons, which impart a tremendous amount of kinetic energy into the body.” He continued:

*Those [high-muzzle velocity weapons] are much more destructive. You’re looking at a wound that, externally, is two, three, four times bigger than any handgun wound. And that is reflective of the damage that happens on the inside.*

*When a bullet from a high-muzzle velocity weapon hits the intestines, it’s like an explosion, whereas a low-muzzle velocity can be very similar to a knife going through the intestines; there’s bleeding, but it doesn’t destroy the whole area. A high-muzzle bullet, however, destroys whole areas of body. With a bone that’s been shot with a standard-issue caliber handgun, you’ll see a break, a hole in the bone, and maybe some displacement. But a high-muzzle weapon shatters that bone into hundreds of microscopic pieces, in a way that cannot be repaired. You need to essentially clean out the bone that has been struck and remove it from the body; it’s now a worthless tissue. You can’t believe that a bullet could do this amount of damage...*

But that’s not the only feature of assault rifles that makes them so deadly. The speed at which rounds can be fired with a semi-automatic assault weapon far exceeds that of a bolt-action rifle that would not be prohibited by an assault weapons ban. Other specific design features of assault rifles that distinguish them from traditional sporting guns and increase their potential for inflicting mass devastation include:

- High-capacity detachable ammunition magazines that hold as many as 75 rounds of ammunition.
- A rear pistol grip (handle), including so-called “thumbhole stocks” and magazines that function like pistol grips.
- A forward grip or barrel shroud. Forward grips (located under the barrel or the forward stock) give a shooter greater control over a weapon during firing.

Deadly assault weapons equipped with high capacity ammunition magazines have become the weapons of choice in mass shootings, including at Sandy Hook Elementary School and in Aurora, Colorado. These weapons and attachments enable shooters to fire dozens of rounds before pausing to reload. During the January 2011 mass shooting in Tucson, Arizona, that killed six and gravely wounded then-Rep. Gabrielle Giffords among others, the shooter was only stopped when he was tackled as he paused to reload. Parents of some of the children killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012 were told by authorities that a number of children were able to escape the shooter when he paused to reload. At a press conference in support of a Connecticut proposal to ban high-capacity magazines in that state, Mark Barden, whose son was killed in the mass shooting, explained, “The more times you

have to reload the more opportunities there are to escape and to stop the shooting. In the amount of time — is somewhere around four minutes — he was able to fire 154 rounds. I think that speaks volumes about reducing the size [of magazines].”

But we don't have to rely only on anecdotal evidence from these few high-profile shootings, as empirical evidence from a number of studies has demonstrated that that assault weapons — defined as those which use a semi-automatic firing mechanism to shoot high-velocity rounds, often out of high-capacity magazines — produce more casualties during mass shootings compared to when other guns are used. In an analysis of mass shootings that occurred between January 2009 and September 2013, researchers found that shootings involving assault weapons or high-capacity magazines were characterized by a significantly higher death and injury rate:

Researchers from the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research reached similar conclusions in an October 2012 report, writing that assault weapons result in “more victims per incident” than shootings involving traditional firearms:

*Not all firearms are created equal. One characteristic of guns that is relevant to public safety, particularly in regard to mass shootings, is ammunition capacity. Large capacity magazines (LCM), typically defined as holding more than 10 rounds of ammunition, increase the number of rounds someone can fire without stopping to reload. An assault weapon is generally defined as a civilian version of a military style weapon. Assault weapons are typically capable of accepting LCMs.*

*Assault weapons and LCMs are common characteristics of guns discussed in policy debates because they are disproportionately used in mass shootings. Mass shootings involving assault weapons typically involve more victims per incident than mass shootings with other weapons. Recent examples of firearms with LCM being used in mass shootings include Jared Lee Loughner's use of a Glock 9mm semi-automatic pistol, with a magazine holding 33 rounds of ammunition, to murder 6 and wound 13 others, including Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, in January 2011. The suspect in the mass shooting at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado that left 12 dead and 58 injured used an assault rifle with a 100-round magazine. Weapons with LCMs were also used in the mass shootings at Virginia Tech University and Fort Hood, Texas.*

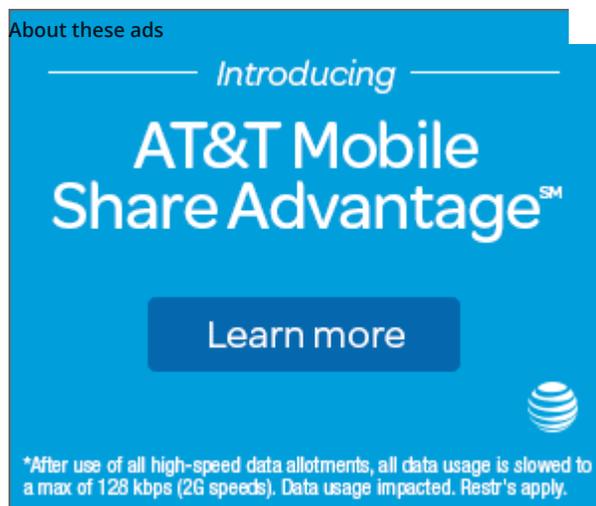
## The Logical Conclusion: While Not A Cure-All, Banning Assault Weapons Would Reduce The Fatality Of Mass Shootings

Although banning assault weapons is by no means a cure-all, there is strong evidence that doing so would reduce the number of deaths and serious injuries during mass shootings. That's why a group of leading professional public health and policy organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Public Health Association, and the American Bar Association, released a report this year calling for an assault weapons ban as part of a broader policy agenda to address the “major public health problem” of gun-related injuries and deaths.

In a position statement expressing support “limitations on access to high-capacity magazines and assault-style weaponry,” the American Pediatric Surgical Association summed up the evidence-based rationale for such restrictions, which have been upheld in the courts:

*Although assault-style rifles are responsible for a minority of overall gun deaths in the United States, they have become a weapon of choice for the assailant whose intent is chaos and casualties. The high muzzle energy, large-capacity magazines, and ability to fire rapidly make these weapons particularly devastating. Their place in a civilian arsenal must be questioned.*

Assault weapons *were* banned in the U.S. between 1994-2004. The 1994 law was riddled with loopholes which made it easy for gun manufacturers to evade; even so, an analysis by the *Washington Post* found that seizures of guns with high capacity magazines by Virginia law enforcement hit an all-time low while the law was in effect. Seizures spiked after the law expired.



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