

CONSUMERS SUPPORT RENEWING AND STRENGTHENING THE FEDERAL ASSAULT WEAPONS BAN

A new survey¹ commissioned by Consumer Federation of America (CFA) has found that a substantial majority of the public supports renewing the federal assault weapons² ban and even more strongly support new measures to strengthen the ban. An important finding of this survey is that a high percentage of Americans want President Bush to persuade Congress to renew the ban. Even a majority of gun owners supports renewing and strengthening the assault weapons ban.

CFA undertook this survey because the federal ban on assault weapons is set to expire less than one year from now? on September 13, 2004? unless Congress and the President enact new legislation. The pro-gun lobby maintains that most Americans don't want the ban renewed, let alone strengthened, and that Congress should not vote on it. CFA surveyed consumer opinion about renewing the ban, measures to strengthen the ban, and whether failure to pass the ban would influence public opinion of Congress and President Bush.

The original law, passed in 1994, bans certain models of semiautomatic assault weapons, as well as high-capacity ammunition magazines that hold more than 10 rounds. Both President Bush and Attorney General Ashcroft have expressed support for the assault weapons ban, and Attorney General Ashcroft has declared the ban constitutional.

The survey was conducted by Opinion Research Corporation International. ORCI interviewed a representative sample of more than 1,000 adult Americans from September 3 to 5, 2003. The survey's margin of error is plus or minus three percentage points.

Most Americans Want Congress and President Bush to Renew the Assault Weapons Ban

Asked if they favored or opposed renewing the assault weapons ban, most Americans said they "strongly favored" or "somewhat favored" renewing the ban, as shown in the attached Figure. **Sixty-two percent said they favored renewing the ban, including 47 percent who strongly favor its renewal. Just over 50 percent of gun owners support renewing the ban, while two thirds of non-gun owners do.**

Higher-income Americans are more likely to support renewing the ban, as are those with higher education. Nearly 70 percent of those in households with incomes above \$75,000 favored

¹ The exact questions are presented in Appendix A.

² Assault weapons are a discrete class of firearm. They incorporate military-style characteristics specifically designed to quickly kill large numbers of human beings. These design characteristics make it easy for a shooter to simply point? as opposed to carefully aim? the weapon to quickly spray a wide area with bullets. Such design characteristics make assault weapons especially attractive to criminals and distinguish them from true hunting or sporting firearms.

renewing the ban, with 55 percent strongly favoring this action. Seventy-one percent of college graduates favored renewing the ban? the highest percentage of any demographic.

Adults between the ages of 45-54 were most supportive of renewing the ban. Nearly 70 percent of adults in this age group want to see the ban renewed.

The majority of Americans want President Bush to take an active role in persuading Congress to renew the ban. **Seventy-four percent of Americans want President Bush to persuade Congress to renew the ban, with more than half of all Americans calling on Bush to make a strong effort.** At least 60 percent of women, African Americans, and those 65 and older want Bush to make a strong effort.

Both President Bush and Attorney General Ashcroft have expressed support for the assault weapons ban. In October 2000, Bush campaign spokesperson Ray Sullivan told *Salon* magazine that he would expect then-candidate Bush to reauthorize the ban. That position was reiterated by Attorney General John Ashcroft during his confirmation hearings on January 17, 2001, when he stated, "It is my understanding that the president-elect of the United States has indicated his clear support for extending the assault weapon ban, and I would be pleased to move forward that position, and to support that as a policy of this president, and as a policy of the Justice Department." Most recently, in April 2003, White House spokesperson Scott McClellan told Knight Ridder news service, "The President supports the current law, and he supports reauthorization of the current law."

Most Americans Support Strengthening the Federal Assault Weapons Ban

CFA's survey also tested public opinion about strengthening the ban. **Sixty-three percent of Americans favor strengthening the assault weapons ban to prevent the gun industry from manufacturing commercial models of military-style assault weapons. Forty-nine percent strongly favor this action. Here too, a majority of gun owners (52 percent) supports strengthening the ban.**

After the 1994 law was enacted, gun manufacturers made minor changes to commercial models of military-style assault weapons, such as the AK-47, so that they can still be bought in the United States. Today, "post-ban" versions of AK-47s and AR-15s, guns banned by name by the 1994 law, are widely available. A post-ban AR-15 clone manufactured by Bushmaster was used by the Washington, DC-area snipers to kill 10 and injure three in October 2002.

Congress is now considering legislation to not only renew, but to strengthen, the federal assault weapons ban. This legislation would redefine the term "assault weapon" to include any semiautomatic rifle, shotgun, or pistol that can accept a detachable magazine and includes **one** listed additional feature such as a pistol grip, fore-end grip, or collapsible stock. Current law includes only assault weapons with a detachable magazine plus **two** additional listed features. (See attached fact sheets on legislation to renew and strengthen the ban.)

Large Majorities Support Specific Measures to Strengthen the Ban

The survey also questioned Americans about their opinions on specific measures to strengthen the federal assault weapons ban currently being considered by Congress. The measures would close the loopholes of the 1994 ban and strengthen enforcement.

Large majorities indicated their support for these measures to strengthen the ban:

1) Background checks on private sales of pre-ban assault weapons? 83% favor, 70% strongly. Even among gun owners, there is strong support for this measure, with 81% percent supporting it? 64% strongly.

Any assault weapon that was legally possessed on the date of enactment of the 1994 ban can continue to be possessed and transferred. There is currently no monitoring or record-keeping of such transfers, even though these “grandfathered” weapons are often used in crime. Private gun owners can sell such guns without proof that the buyer has passed a criminal history check.

Congress is considering legislation to require that all future transfers of grandfathered assault weapons be conducted through a federal firearms licensee or through a local law enforcement agency where state law provides for that option. This would ensure that a background check is performed and records are maintained of all transfers.

2) Prohibit possession of assault weapons by juveniles? 86% support, 89% non-gun owners, 82% gun owners.

Under current law, juveniles under the age of 18 are not prohibited from owning some assault weapons, although it is illegal for juveniles to acquire or possess handguns. The public overwhelmingly supports changing the law so that only those age 21 and over can possess assault weapons.

Congress is considering legislation that would establish a uniform ban on assault weapon possession by juveniles.

3) Ban conversion parts kits? 83% support, 90% non-gun owners, 72% gun owners.

With few restrictions, all the parts needed to build a semiautomatic assault weapon can be bought through the mail as kits. There has been an exponential growth in the availability of such kits over the last few years in publications that market guns to dealers and also sell to the general public. They are also widely available over the Internet. At least one law enforcement officer was killed with an assault weapon made from a conversion parts kit.³

³ “Suspect in Cop Killing Made His Own Gun: Investigators say he got parts by mail,” *San Francisco Chronicle*,

Legislation in Congress would expand coverage of the ban to include conversion parts kits.

Assault Weapons' Threat to Law Enforcement Influences Opinion

An analysis of FBI data by the Violence Policy Center in its study, *"Officer Down"-Assault Weapons and the War on Law Enforcement*, found that **at least one in five law enforcement officers slain in the line of duty between January 1, 1998, and December 31, 2001, were killed with assault weapons.** The survey questioned Americans about whether that statistic would make them more likely to support renewing the ban.

Seventy-two percent of Americans said that they would be more likely to support renewing the ban after being told the statistic. Fifty-two percent said they would be a lot more likely to support it. One-quarter of those who said they did not support renewing the ban said that knowledge of this fact would make them a lot more likely to support the renewal of the ban.

After several high-profile shootings in the early 1990s, Congress approved the assault weapons ban, recognizing the severe threat assault weapons pose to public safety and law enforcement officers. Nearly 10 years later, that threat still exists.

Conclusion: The Public Wants Assault Weapons Out of Their Neighborhoods

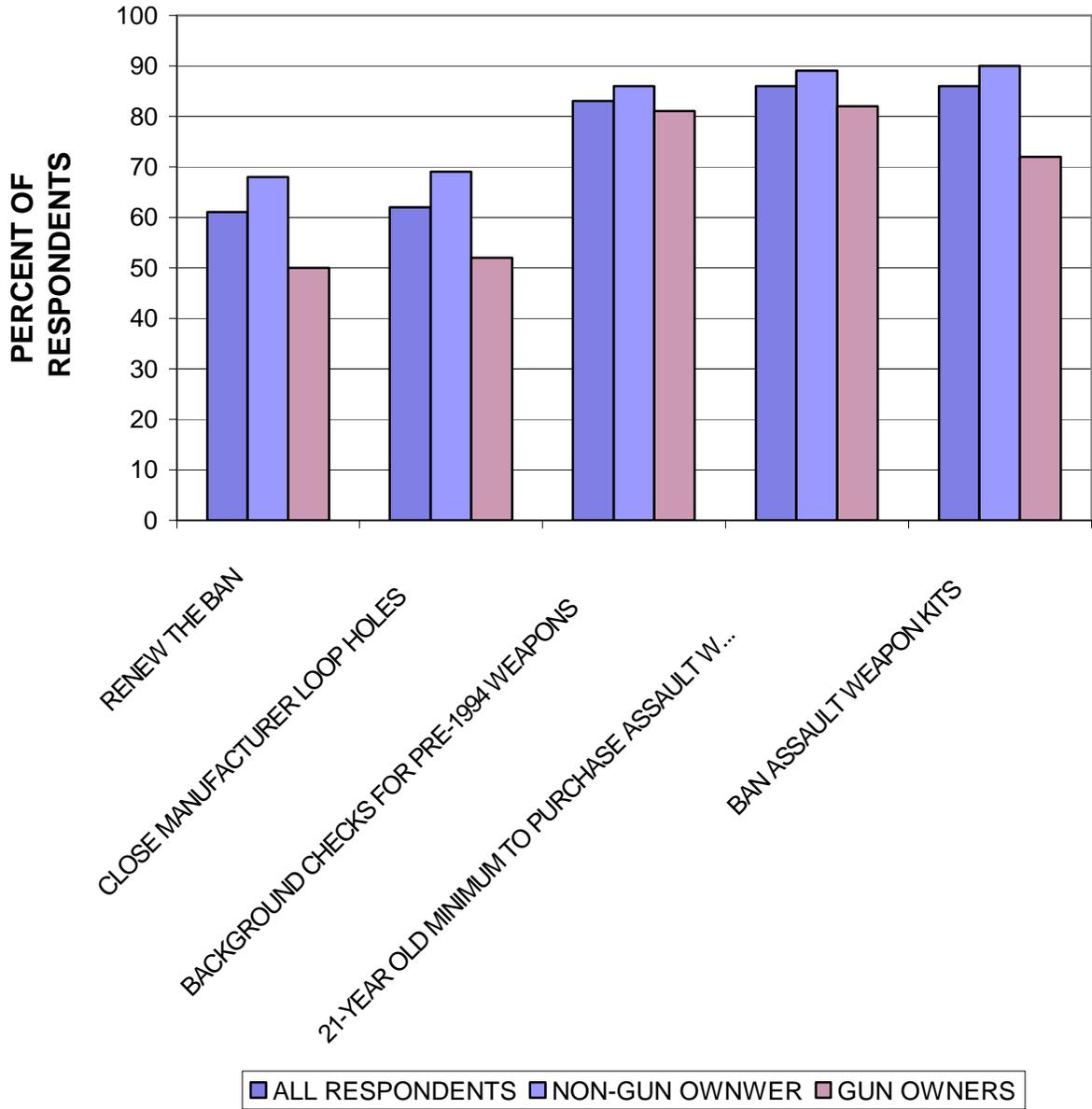
This survey provides Congress and President Bush with public support for a stronger, more effective, assault weapons ban. Americans want a ban that is more restrictive and more foolproof, and that better protects their neighborhoods. The need to ensure the safety of law enforcement and the protection of the public health, combined with the gun industry's actions to evade the current ban, give Congress a clear path to legislation.

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Consumer Federation of America (CFA) is a non-profit association of 300 pro-consumer groups, which was founded in 1968 to advance the consumer interest through advocacy and education.

Research Director Mark Cooper, Ph.D. and Firearms Project Director Susan Peschin, MHS authored this report.

THE PUBLIC SUPPORTS RENEWING AND STRENGTHENING THE ASSAULT WEAPONS BAN



APPENDIX A: QUESTIONS

Do you favor or oppose RENEWING the assault weapons ban? Would you say you . . .
Strongly favor=1; Somewhat favor=2; Somewhat oppose=3; Strongly oppose=4; Don't know=99

If Congress failed to pass the ban, would that change your approval of Congress for failing to pass the ban? Would you think better or worse of Congress? Would you say . . .
Much better=1; Somewhat better=2; No change in your approval=3; Somewhat worse=4
Much worse=5; Don't know=99

President Bush has said that he supports the assault weapons ban. What effort, if any, would you like him to make to persuade Congress to renew the ban? Would you say no effort, a moderate effort, or a strong effort to persuade Congress to renew the ban?
No effort=1; Moderate effort=2; Strong effort=3; Don't know=99

After the ban was passed, manufacturers made minor changes to commercial models of military-style assault weapons, such as the AK-47, so that they can still be bought in the U.S. Do you favor or oppose STRENGTHENING the assault weapons ban to prevent the gun industry from manufacturing these kinds of weapons? Would you say . . .
Strongly favor=1; Somewhat favor=2; Somewhat oppose=3; Strongly oppose=4; Don't know=99

It is legal to buy assault weapons named in the ban if they were manufactured before 1994. Private gun owners can sell such guns without proof that the buyer has passed a criminal history check. Do you favor or oppose a law that would require BACKGROUND CHECKS on private sales of PRE-BAN assault weapons? Would you say . . .
Strongly favor=1; Somewhat favor=2; Somewhat oppose=3; Strongly oppose=4; Don't know=99

Under current law, juveniles under the age of 18 can OWN some assault weapons. Yet, a person must be 21 to buy a handgun. Should the law be changed also that only those AGE 21 AND OVER can buy assault weapons?
Yes=1; No=2; Don't know=99

With few restrictions, all the parts needed to build an assault weapon can be bought through the mail as kits. Do you think such KITS should be banned?
Yes, the kits should be banned=1; No, the kits should not be banned=2; Don't know=99

If you were told that ONE OUT OF FIVE law enforcement officers slain in the line of duty from 1998 to 2001 were killed with assault weapons, would that make you more likely to support RENEWING the ban? Would you say . . .
A lot more likely=1; Somewhat more likely=2; Not at all likely=3; Don't know=99

Do you personally own a firearm?
Yes=1; No=2; Don't know=99