



National High School Ethics Bowl Regional Cases 2018-2019

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WASHINGTON HIGH SCHOOL ETHICS BOWL – PLEASE NOTE:

These cases were revised and edited for the Washington State competition. Each case includes study questions to help teams consider issues presented by the case, and do not necessarily represent the most important questions raised. At the competition, each presentation should begin with the question or questions the team thinks are most important in considering the case (which might or might not include any of the study questions), with the remainder of the presentation addressing that question or questions.

Although teams may do factual research as part of analyzing the case and preparing the presentation, facts external to the case may not be relied upon in the presentation (as there is no way for the judges to determine the accuracy of outside factual claims).

1. Company Loyalty

Ravi and Amaia work as data analysts for a large tech company. Although the two met at work, they've become close friends and frequently spend time together outside the workplace. Recently their work trajectories have diverged: Amaia is quite good at her job and has moved up the corporate ladder quickly, while Ravi finds his work unsatisfying and tedious. It's also become clear that their boss, Ed, prefers Amaia. Ed consistently selects her for high prestige projects, while leaving Ravi to do essential but menial work. Moreover, as various department employees have left the company, Ravi has had to pick up their work without getting a raise—he is currently the only one doing a job that used to be handled by three people. Both Amaia and Ravi find this to be unfair.

Given his dissatisfaction with the job, Ravi has decided to quit and go back to school. He has been accepted to a great program and will start in a few months. In the meantime, however, he has decided that if he's going to have a few more months at a job he hates, he's going to ask for a raise. As he reasons, he's in a good position to do so. On the one hand, if he doesn't get the raise, he doesn't have anything to lose since he already plans to leave—any tension between him and Ed that might arise from asking for more pay will only last a short time. On the other hand, if he does get the raise, the extra money he'll receive will help him in starting his new life and will cost the company very little since they would only pay him at an increased rate for a short time. Ravi feels that the money he'd be receiving is money that he deserves for being made to do the work of others without getting a raise.

Ravi tells Amaia his plan and asks her not to tell Ed that he's going back to school. If Ed knows Ravi is planning to leave the company, he won't feel compelled to give him a raise, and will begin looking for a replacement—all of Ravi's leverage will be gone. Amaia agrees not to bring it up with Ed, but tells Ravi that she feels uncomfortable lying or purposefully hiding information and she will tell the truth if Ed asks her directly whether she knows anything that would help him make his decision.

A few days later Ravi asks Ed for a raise. The two don't come to an immediate agreement. It's obvious that Ed doesn't want to give Ravi the raise. Ed calls Amaia into his office and asks whether she has any pertinent information regarding Ravi's request for a raise. In response, Amaia tells Ed that she thinks Ravi deserves to make more money for the additional responsibilities that he has been given, but also that he is planning to go back to school in a few months. Consequently, Ravi doesn't get a raise and spends his remaining time at the company doing the same work at the same pay. Ravi and Amaia's friendship suffers since Ravi feels betrayed and considers Amaia's commitment to telling the truth as a sign that her loyalty to the company is more important to her than their friendship.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Has Ravi acted unethically? Why or why not?
2. Was Amaia right to tell Ed of Ravi's decision to go back to school? Why or why not?
3. In general terms, what does it mean to be loyal to someone or something? To what extent is loyalty morally valuable?

2. Private Money in Academia

Universities are increasingly accepting private money to fund academic centers, programs, and faculty. Often, this money comes from sources with political agendas. For example, the Charles Koch Foundation has donated money to George Mason University and several of its affiliated centers, including the Mercatus Center and the Institute for Humane Studies, both of which promote classical liberal ideas.¹ Michael Bloomberg has donated to the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, which produces research on the public health effects of widespread gun availability that is then used for gun control advocacy purposes.² In light of these developments, academics have begun debating the moral permissibility of accepting private money from such sources.

Critics claim that money from these sources introduces political agendas into academic research, which should be carried out in a free and unbiased way. These critics worry that, even when these donors have no official say over faculty hires, their political goals inevitably influence who is hired because the continued availability of the funds may depend on donor approval. Apart from hiring decisions, the process threatens to give powerful, politically-motivated individuals or groups additional power, allowing them to influence the topics academics explore in their research and teaching and, ultimately, which ideas become more visible to policymakers and the broader public. Finally, critics worry that, at least in the case of public universities, state legislators would have fewer incentives to continue funding public universities at high levels as more and more private money becomes available.

Proponents of private funding in academia argue that as long as the supported research and teaching meet the standards of acceptable scholarship, it doesn't matter how it is funded. Some funding clearly has biased hiring, research, or teaching, but by no means all; and private funding often plays a crucial role in making academically valuable programs possible. As long as the supported programs meet high standards of academic quality and intellectual freedom and the potential for unacceptable influences is carefully addressed, seeking and accepting private support is morally permissible and may well be morally important. Private money might make possible important research and teaching that otherwise would not happen (or would happen much less than is optimal). Finally, proponents note that academics, university administrators, and, for public colleges and universities, state legislators, like everyone else, have their own political views that can influence hiring, research, teaching, etc., so private donors are hardly the first or only sources of possible partisanship influences.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. To what extent is it appropriate or inappropriate for private donors to influence faculty hires, assuming that the faculty meet the relevant academic standards?
2. Is there any morally significant difference between ideologically-driven private funding for empirically-based research (such as in the sciences and social sciences) and for non-empirically-based research (such as in the humanities)?
3. What value, if any, is there in political diversity in academia? How, if at all, should universities promote this type of diversity?

¹ <http://polluterwatch.org/charles-koch-university-funding-database>

² <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/aug/26/george-soros-tom-steyer-michael-bloomberg-koch-bro/>

3. Liver Allocation

In the United States, organ transplants, including liver transplants, are coordinated by a non-profit called the United Network for Organ Sharing. Given that donated organs have a limited time frame for their viability, the U.S. is divided into 11 geographic areas for liver-donation purposes.¹ Within these regions, patients receive donated livers in order of need. However, there is a wide disparity in donated livers across the regions. For example, in Region 9, which includes New York, 327 livers were donated in 2016, whereas in Region 3, which includes the Deep South and Puerto Rico, 1336 livers were donated. This disparity is due to many factors, including prevalent causes of death; some causes of death, like heart attack, usually leave livers intact, whereas others, like liver disease, do not. In Region 3, for instance, strokes are a frequent cause of death, leading to many more donations of viable livers.²

A new policy change works to mitigate this geographic disparity. Regardless of membership in a transplant region, a patient is eligible for any liver that becomes available within 150 nautical miles of the hospital where the transplant will occur. Approved by the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network, this policy “will make more livers available in some places—including cities such as New York and Chicago—where the shortage is more severe than it is in regions such as the southeastern United States.”³ Many view this change as an acceptable improvement in addressing disparities, but not totally satisfying—partly because this would not entirely eliminate those disparities, but also because it does not address one of its key causes, which is the difference in rates of organ donation in different regions.

Additionally, this change leaves in place another feature of the current system that has received criticism: it will still be possible for people to join multiple regional liver registries if they can afford it. A person would need to be able to pay for travel and accommodations in the new region, in addition to covering the costs of a second testing and possible return visits. This expense is prohibitively expensive for many. However, those who support allowing patients to join multiple registries emphasize the autonomy of patients: “When it's come up for a vote, patient advocacy groups have argued that while things like test results and blood types are out of the patients' control, determining whether to obtain a second listing and where to do it allows the patient to be proactive.”⁴

Despite the change to regional allocation, discussion continues about how to make liver transplants—and organ transplants in general—more equitably accessible to those who need them. In 2016 more than 7,000 candidates died while on an organ transplant wait list, or within 30 days of leaving the list for personal or medical reasons, without receiving an organ transplant.⁵

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Is it fair to distribute organs by geographic availability?
2. What should we use as the primary criteria for determining how to distribute livers and other vital organs?
3. Should joining multiple regional registries for liver transplants be allowed?

¹ <https://optn.transplant.hrsa.gov/learn/about-transplantation/how-organ-allocation-works/>

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/liver-transplant-distribution-changed-after-years-of-debate/2017/12/04/fedefc0e-d92c-11e7-b859-fb0995360725_story.html?utm_term=.f88be9266d31

³ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/09/26/549224583/searching-for-a-fairer-way-to-distribute-donor-livers>

⁴ <https://news.vice.com/article/good-luck-getting-an-organ-transplant-if-youre-poor-in-america>

⁵ <https://unos.org/data/>

4. China's Social Credit System

On June 14, 2014, China's State Council announced a plan to establish a social credit system, which would assign "social credit scores" to citizens based on their behavior.¹ A citizen's social credit score goes up based on socially desirable actions, like paying taxes or purchasing Chinese products; it declines if a person engages in behaviors that the State Council deems dishonest or problematic, such as committing crimes or making negative statements about the government. Access to social benefits, like receiving a home loan or travelling on an airplane, would be partly determined by one's social credit score. With this system, the Chinese government aims to create a more honest and harmonious society.

The Chinese State Council postulates that if citizens are rewarded for good behavior and punished for bad behavior, then people will want to act better. Citizens in China are already seeing the positive effects of this system. As one Chinese citizen explained, "I feel like in the past six months, people's behavior has gotten better and better . . . For example, when we drive, now we always stop in front of crosswalks. If you don't stop, you will lose your points. At first, we just worried about losing points, but now we got used to it."² Over time, when citizens of a society are following laws and acting honestly, the society as a whole becomes more just, fair, and peaceful.³

Critics, however, regard the system as an invasion of privacy and personal freedom. One concern is that the government assigns these ratings based on China's increasingly dense network of surveillance cameras and the advancement of artificial intelligence technology.⁴ Additionally, some critics argue that the system may be subject to error or abuse by the government. For example, the social credit score of Liu Hu, a Chinese journalist, placed him on the untrustworthy list, and as a result, he was prohibited from flying, buying a home, and sending his child to private school. His low score was due to tweets the government did not like. According to Liu, "You feel you're being controlled by the list."⁵

Critics on the international stage worry that policies like China's will spread. For example, Tyler Grant has argued that "[t]he free world is not far behind if we don't protect privacy, deny our policymakers' desire to expand the reach of government, and resist the urge to commercially or socially punish those who don't share our political ideology. Privacy and liberty are never more than one generation away from extinction."⁶ Finally, some people might be concerned that by generating external incentives to engage in pro-social behaviors, programs like this actually undermine intrinsic moral motivation, making people less likely to do the right thing for the right reason.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What are the moral advantages and disadvantages of a social credit system like China's?
2. To what extent is China's social credit system a framework for moral behavior?
3. How can a community balance its interest in encouraging its members to engage in socially desirable behaviors with community members' interests in individual privacy and liberty?

¹<https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2014/06/14/planning-outline-for-the-construction-of-a-social-credit-system-2014-2020/>

²<http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/03/life-inside-chinas-social-credit-laboratory/>

³<https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2014/06/14/planning-outline-for-the-construction-of-a-social-credit-system-2014-2020/>

⁴<https://www.cbsnews.com/amp/news/china-social-credit-system-surveillance-cameras/>

⁵<https://www.cbsnews.com/amp/news/china-social-credit-system-surveillance-cameras/>

⁶<http://thehill.com/opinion/technology/386524-the-west-could-be-closer-to-chinas-system-of-social-credit-scoring-than>

5. Fake Followers

Think of some of the athletes, musicians, actors, political figures, or businesses you most admire. Chances are at least some of them have paid companies to generate followers, “likes,” and comments on their social media accounts. Dan Leal, in a recent *New York Times* exposé on “follower factories,” admitted to having purchased over 150,000 followers for his Twitter account, @PornoDan, from Devumi, one of the many companies that sells social media followers in bulk. Leal bragged that his investment in fake followers had more than paid for itself, and that he was confident that he would not be penalized by Twitter, although buying followers is against Twitter’s terms of service. “Countless public figures, companies, music acts, etc. purchase followers,” Leal told the *Times*. “If Twitter was to purge everyone who did so there would be hardly any of them on it.” Some of Devumi’s corporate records show that among Devumi’s clients are a number of celebrities and corporations, including former Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis, singer Clay Aiken, and celebrity baker Paul Hollywood. So were the political campaign of Ecuador’s current president, Lenín Moreno, and China’s state-run news agency, Xinhua. Even a member of Twitter’s board of directors and a *New York Times* travel writer were customers.¹

Companies like Devumi generate followers and other forms of social media engagement in a variety of ways. In some cases, likes, retweets, and follows come from real people in “click farms,” who make as little as \$120 per year to sit at computers and click “like” for hours on end.² In other cases, automated fake accounts (often called “bots”) are created. Higher quality (and more expensive) bots look “authentic,” often by closely imitating the accounts of real users. For example, a Minnesota teenager named Jessica Rychly was dismayed to discover that a Twitter account using her name and likeness, along with a username nearly identical to hers, was being used to promote cryptocurrency, Canadian real estate, and more.

In an “influencer economy” in which billions of advertising dollars are spent every year promoting goods and services through influential social media accounts, it’s difficult to know where to lay the blame. Are the companies who promise to generate followers for a price to blame, or are the people and organizations who pay them? Do the social media companies have the primary obligation to enforce their own terms of service? Critics point out that, just as “influencers” get higher advertising revenues for having more followers, Facebook and Twitter garner higher stock prices by having more users, and so have a disincentive to crack down too hard on bots. Some influencers admit that buying followers is wrong, while others regard it as merely a tool of the trade. Some corporations who advertise through influencers have vowed to take responsibility by cracking down on influencers who buy followers. “This is a deep and systematic issue, an issue of trust that fundamentally threatens to undermine the relationship between consumers and brands,” declared Unilever’s Chief Marketing Officer, Keith Weed. “Brands have to play their role in resolving it . . . As one of the largest advertisers in the world, we cannot have an environment where our consumers don’t trust what they see online.”³

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Is it wrong to buy followers and likes on social media? Does it matter if they are real people, such as those employed by click farms? Is this morally more or less problematic than using bots?
2. Who bears the primary moral responsibility for the widespread use of fake followers?
3. Unilever vowed not to do business with influencers and platforms who pay for followers and users, yet the company pays “influencers” to promote Unilever products to their friends and followers. Is Unilever’s advertising strategy different in any morally relevant way from the influencers try to look more influential by buying followers? Why or why not?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/27/technology/social-media-bots.html>

² <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/aug/02/click-farms-appearance-online-popularity>

³ <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/unilever-to-crack-down-on-influencers-who-buy-fake-followers-and-use-bots/>

6. Love Drugs

Romantic love has long been considered an emotional experience that arises in mysterious ways between people who are attracted to one another. It can be overwhelming, fleeting, star-crossed, or long lasting—but we typically think of these feelings as outside of our control. What if we could control this?

In the United States, approximately 40% to 50% of marriages end in divorce.¹ With new scientific interventions, we may be able to reduce this number by increasing or prolonging feelings of love. “We treat depression, anxiety and other emotion-based responses with drugs. If love isn’t working for us, why not add a chemical?” asks Rich Wordsworth.² Current research shows that oxytocin is key to the experience of love. Various pharmaceutical drugs prompt the release of oxytocin and there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that this can have an influence on the initiation and persistence of feelings of attraction and love.³ In some cases, these substances are linked with increased bonding that happens more quickly than usual and lasts beyond the chemicals. However, in other cases, when a person stops taking the drug, the feelings of love disappear, which can lead to unexpected emotional separation and pain.⁴

Other substances have been linked with deadening the experience of love. SSRIs are commonly used to treat depression and anxiety, but some of them have side effects that include blunting a person’s ability to connect with others emotionally as well as causing sexual dysfunction. If this line of research were extended, we could imagine using substances to manipulate who and how people love, either willingly or unwillingly.⁵

So-called love drugs could help strengthen or stabilize long-term relationships; they could help people get over difficult break-ups; or they could help individuals to leave abusive relationships.⁶ As scientists continue to study the effects of chemicals on love, significant ethical concerns arise. Under ordinary circumstances, we use our emotions as our guides. But if we can change our emotions, should we? Is there anything wrong with using an artificial stimulation for love if participants are willing? Would the resulting relationship be in some way less real or authentic as a result?

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What, if anything, makes loving relationships (including romantic relationships) valuable or important? How, if at all, would “love drugs” add to or detract from that value or importance?
2. What does it mean for a feeling or relationship to be authentic? Would love drugs make the resulting feelings or relationships less authentic? Why or why not?
3. What are the morally relevant similarities and differences between using some chemical help to end the pain of romantic heartbreak and using chemical help to strengthen one’s romantic feelings toward another?
4. Does it matter if someone uses a love drug?

¹ <http://www.apa.org/topics/divorce/>

² <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/love-drugs-how-to-control-love-with-drugs>

³ <https://qz.com/953217/love-drugs-will-soon-be-a-reality-but-should-we-take-them/>

⁴ <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/love-drugs-how-to-control-love-with-drugs>

⁵ <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/love-drugs-how-to-control-love-with-drugs>

⁶ <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/love-drugs-how-to-control-love-with-drugs> and <https://qz.com/953217/love-drugs-will-soon-be-a-reality-but-should-we-take-them/>

7. De-extinction

The possibility of reviving extinct species is often explored in science fiction, perhaps most famously in *Jurassic Park*. Although there is still a long way to go before humans can bring back dinosaurs, scientists have had a considerable amount of success bringing back species that have gone extinct more recently. In 2003, a team of Spanish and French scientists brought the bucardo, or Pyrenean ibex, back from the dead, only to see it go extinct once again minutes after being revived due to organ deformities. The bucardo was brought back by injecting nuclei from preserved bucardo cells into goat eggs emptied of their own DNA and implanting them into surrogate mothers.¹ Since then, there have been promising projects that aim to bring back other extinct species, such as the passenger pigeon and the gastric brooding frog.

Proponents of this practice, known as “de-extinction,” argue that humans have an obligation to bring back species that were driven to extinction by human activities, such as the dodo bird. In addition, they argue that bringing back extinct species would significantly benefit ecosystems by increasing biodiversity and, in some cases, restoring important environmental balances. Bringing back extinct species, and the process of learning how to do so, might also yield new scientific insights. The “wonder” factor of bringing back extinct species might itself be enough justification to put more funding into the cause—or so some proponents argue.²

Opponents of de-extinction point out that de-extinction will draw away resources and attention from other scientific efforts to preserve biodiversity. Why devote money and scientific effort to bring back lost species when there are so many endangered species on the brink of extinction? Additionally, some critics point out that if brought back, previously extinct species could pose unknown threats to the livelihood of existing habitats and species.³ Furthermore, if many factors brought about the extinction of a given species, should we intervene to artificially reverse the process?

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What, if anything, is problematic about the loss of a given species? Are species valuable for their own sake? Or are they valuable for some other reason?
2. Should humans prioritize species on the brink of extinction over species that are already extinct?
3. What are the most morally significant criteria in deciding whether to revive an extinct species?

¹ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2013/04/species-revival-bringing-back-extinct-animals/>

² <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2013/april/greely-species-deextinction-040413.html>

³ http://e360.yale.edu/features/the_case_against_de-extinction_its_a_fascinating_but_dumb_idea

8. Picnic Nit-Pick?

Randy is enjoying a community picnic. Close by, some neighborhood kids are crowded around Lisa, age seven, who is easily beating one second-grader after another in chess. As she continues to quickly dispatch her opponents, and as children run to tell the adults how good she is, Randy begins to watch. Immediately, he sees that Lisa is cheating, subtly moving pieces when the others aren't looking, and making up rules that suit her as the games progress ("You have to say 'check' when you're about to take my queen").

After a while, adults begin to take notice of Lisa's dominance, stopping by to compliment her, and remarking to each other about her impressive skills. Soon, the picnic is abuzz with talk of the neighborhood's little chess prodigy. Randy, who, as far as he can tell, is the only adult who can see *how* Lisa is winning, can barely stand to watch her soak up the applause. As parents line up to praise her, Lisa puts on a totally unconvincing show of modesty and makes remarks such as, "Well my dad *does* teach me Latin phrases...."

Tempted as he is to expose Lisa's cheating, Randy wonders if doing so is a good idea. He doesn't have kids himself, and something about the idea of a grumpy neighbor intervening in a board game played by seven-year-olds doesn't sit right with him. If he had a relationship with Lisa's parents, he might feel comfortable telling them what he witnessed, but he doesn't know them or their daughter, and they don't seem to be present at the picnic, anyway.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What should Randy do, if anything, about Lisa's cheating?
2. To what extent should adults care about the bad deeds of others' children?
3. If Randy gently confronts Lisa and she denies wrongdoing, how should he respond?

9. Tsk Tsk, Tusk Tusk¹

The World Wide Fund for Nature estimates that poachers kill 100,000 elephants each year for their tusks. International criminal syndicates carry out much of this poaching, using sophisticated military equipment, which makes the problem nearly impossible to solve.

One approach to is to try to dry up demand. In 1990, the Kenyan government persuaded the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to add elephants to its list of protected species, thereby prohibiting trade in ivory except under special circumstances. To persuade CITES, Kenya set twelve tons of confiscated ivory on fire. Whereas a single large tusk can burn for a week, a pyre of tusks burns longer, billowing black smoke. Officials claim that the blaze significantly reduced the level of poaching in Kenya by sending the message that the only real value of elephant tusks is to the elephant.

Other countries followed Kenya's strategy of attacking the market by destroying ivory. In 2012, Gabon burned its entire stockpile. In 2013, the Philippines became the first non-African country to burn its stockpile, thereby ensuring that their ivory couldn't re-enter the market through governmental corruption or lax oversight. American conservation groups joined suit in 2015 when they organized a public burning of one ton of ivory items in Times Square, donated by people who no longer felt comfortable owning ivory.

In April 2016, Kenya conducted its fourth and largest public burning of ivory, stacking 105 tons of ivory in mounds ten feet high and twenty feet wide. This ivory was worth more than \$100 million on the black market, more than Kenya spends in a year on its entire environmental and natural resources agency.

The Kenyan strategy has met with some criticism. Destroying so much ivory only makes it scarcer, which threatens to increase both its value and the motivation for further poaching. The fires themselves consume fuel and produce much pollution, which leads some to say that simply crushing the ivory would be better, though less spectacular. Some critics say that tracking down the traders would be wiser, perhaps by introducing into the market artificial but realistic tusks containing implanted GPS chips. They argue that it makes little sense to destroy something as beautiful as ivory when not all of it comes from poaching; some comes from elephants that die naturally.

Other African countries have adopted very different strategies to protect their elephants. In 2008, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Botswana together raised \$15 million by auctioning off 102 tons of ivory. They then used the money for elephant conservation. Instead of following Kenya's approach of denying the ivory's economic value, these countries focus on the high economic value of the living animals. The government of Botswana, in particular, launched a campaign to convince its citizens that elephants are more valuable alive than dead. A single elephant is worth approximately \$1.6 million in tourism over its lifetime, which is seventy-six times more than the tusks would fetch on the black market.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Is there anything morally objectionable about buying or selling ivory that has come from elephants that have died naturally?
2. What are the morally relevant similarities and differences between ivory and exotic furs and leathers as consumer goods? Should they be treated differently?
3. What, ethically speaking, are the relevant advantages and disadvantages of ivory destruction, compared to other strategies for addressing elephant poaching?

¹ This case is adapted from the 2017 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl Nationals Case Set. Many thanks to the IEB for allowing us to use it! For more information, visit them here: <http://appe-ethics.org/ethics-bowl/>

10. Gun Control

In the wake of recent mass shootings, gun control continues to be a controversial issue in the United States. The shooting in Las Vegas in October of 2017 was the deadliest in American history, killing 58 people and injuring 851.¹ According to data from Gun Violence Archive—which defines a mass shooting as any incident in which at least four people are shot or killed (not counting the shooter)—as of the end of August, there have already been 237 mass shootings in 2018. In these incidents, 235 people have been killed and nearly 1,000 people have been injured.² Mass shootings, however, are a relatively small part of the full picture of gun violence and death in the U.S., which includes other homicides, accidents, and suicide (which contributes to more than 20,000 gun deaths annually).³ Moreover, these numbers don't fully reflect the broader psychological effects of wide-scale gun violence.

Those who advocate stricter gun control point to the negative effects of the continued availability of guns in the U.S. A 2012 estimate from the Congressional Research Service put the number of guns in the U.S. at 310 million, more than the population of the country at the time.⁴ The rate of gun homicides in the U.S. (in 2010) was 25.2 times higher than the rate in a sample of 23 other OECD countries, all of which have much stricter gun laws than the U.S.⁵ In 2016, the gun death rate in the U.S. was 11.96 per 100,000 people or 0.01196%. Canada, by contrast, had a gun death rate (in 2011) of 2.05 per 100,000 people or 0.00205%. Even in countries with very strict gun laws, such as the U.K., the gun death rate (in 2013) was 0.22 per 100,000 or 0.00022%. Advocates claim that this data shows that the continued availability of so many guns in the U.S. is a threat to public safety and a violation of the individual's right to personal security.⁶

Opponents of gun control often appeal to the right to self-defense. Because the right to self-defense is so important, it would require an enormous gain in personal security to justify government action limiting this right by limiting access to guns. The statistics, opponents of gun control argue, do not justify harsher gun control measures. They argue that because the chances of being killed by a firearm is so low overall, comparisons with other countries are not convincing enough to constrain the right to self-defense. On their view, if the government were to act to put significant limits on the availability of guns, private citizens would be deprived of one of the most effective means of self-defense.

Beyond questions about the total number of guns in the U.S., there are important debates about the types of firearms that people should be allowed to possess. Proponents of stricter gun control measures point out, for instance, that assault weapons, high capacity magazines, and bump stocks, among other things, are not necessary for self-protection, and thus can be legitimately prohibited. In response to this argument, gun advocates point out that although these weapons and accessories get a lot of public attention because of their use in some high-profile cases, they are used in a very small percentage of gun violence incidents. Therefore, prohibiting these weapons is unlikely to make a meaningful dent in the overall number of gun deaths.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. Does the right to self-defense justify gun ownership? Why or why not?
2. How should a society balance the individual rights of its members to self-protection with its responsibility to promote public safety more generally?
3. When, if ever, is it justifiable to restrict an individual's right to self-defense?
4. To what extent does the rate of gun violence justify passing laws to restrict gun ownership?

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_Las_Vegas_shooting

² <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>

³ <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/mass-shootings-are-a-bad-way-to-understand-gun-violence/>

⁴ <https://fas.org/spp/crs/misc/RL32842.pdf>

⁵ [https://www.amjmed.com/article/S0002-9343\(15\)01030-X/fulltext](https://www.amjmed.com/article/S0002-9343(15)01030-X/fulltext)

⁶ <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/19/why-gun-control-is-not-enough/>