

CAN GUN CONTROL HELP TO REDUCE CRIME?

(Name)

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For several decades in a row, the gun debate was a feature of every political cycle in the United States. Such a high level of public attention towards the issue of gun control is understandable. Gun violence remains one of the most significant social ills of the US, and events such as mass shootings in public places, especially schools, contribute to public anxiety about the possibilities of the right to bear arms. Rational arguments provided by activists on both sides are sound. Thus, the only option to advance the debate is to analyze the social outcomes of various modes of gun policies pragmatically. The study of the epidemiology of gun violence in the US and worldwide indicates that stricter gun control results in a reduction of gun-related deaths. However, there is no clear evidence whether tighter gun control leads to a reduction in lethal crime incidents in general, and there is a case to be made that open carry laws lead to a decrease of gun-related deaths.

In order to discuss gun crime, its scope in the grander scheme of crime epidemics, both in the US and worldwide, must be well defined. Among the common misconceptions related to gun murders in the US, there is the notion that the entirety of deaths caused by firearm wounds are related to gun-related crimes.¹ As a result of this, an enormous number of gun-related deaths are often conflated with the rates of unprovoked criminal gun violence leading to death, like in the case of the figure of 33,636 deaths by guns reported by Sanchez² as a point to highlight gun control as a much more needed political measure than anti-terrorist safety.

These figures can be elaborated on even further in a useful manner, being categorized further into at least three groups: suicides, homicides by criminals, and killings caused by

¹ Winkler, Adam. *Gunfight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011, p. 29.

² Sanchez, Ray. "Death and Guns in the USA." CNN. October 04, 2015. Accessed July 23, 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/03/us/gun-deaths-united-states/index.html>.

justified self-defense. According to FBI data for 2013, the number of gun-related homicides constituted 12,153—this figure is thrice less than the total number of gun-related deaths. As for a further distinction between justifiable and unjustifiable gun killing, only 458 killings in 2013 were reported by FBI as justifiable.³ It would also be useful to compare it to the number of murders caused by other means, such as knives, blunt weapons, poison, etc.: according to the FBI, gun-related homicides in 2013 constituted 68% of the total, with this ratio being preserved within the range of 2-3% over the last five years.⁴ This ratio is still unusually high as compared to most other countries, yet at least they allow one to understand the true scope of gun violence in the US.

It is clear already that the most widespread violent usage of guns in the US is for the purpose of suicide. It is estimated that suicide attempts using firearms are significantly more likely to have a lethal result.⁵ Acknowledgment of this fact leads to the realization that gun control measures related to background checks for the psychological health of the purchaser alongside with better public health care policies related to depression and related psychological disorders promise to be the most efficient measure of gun control. Aside from this, Lewiecki and Miller propose an increase of delay between the start of the purchase of a firearm and the access to it at least for two weeks as a means to combat suicide impulsivity, since an absolute statistical majority of phases of suicide impulsivity end during this period.⁶ This proposal, however, would prevent only suicides committed by people who are not active owners of firearms, and do not

³ Federal Bureau of Investigation. "Murder Victims by Weapon, 2012–2016." FBI — Uniform Crime Reporting, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/tables/expanded-homicide-data-table-4.xls>.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Shenassa, E. D., S. N. Catlin, and S. L. Buka. "Lethality of firearms relative to other suicide methods: a population based study." *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 57, no. 2 (2003), 123-124.

⁶ Lewiecki, E. Michael, and Sara A. Miller. "Suicide, guns, and public policy." *American journal of public health* 103, no. 1 (2013), 29.

exclude suicide by gun owners and those where firearms used were kept unsafely in a household. For the latter instance, increased measures of responsibility for unsafe gun storage is an acceptable and non-controversial policy project.

While suicides using guns may constitute the most urgent call for gun control, it is violent murders using firearms that is usually thought about when gun control is considered by the public. In this type of discussion, the first and foremost thing to acknowledge is that contemporary research on crime epidemics generally agree that there are no consistent policies that would prevent mass shootings, including school shootings. Firstly, there are no underlying demographic types or preferred weapons of choice that would unite mass shooters in a significant trend. Moreover, according to Agnich, mass shootings do not even constitute the main means of mass violence—neither in the US nor worldwide: “Non-firearm related incidents result in a higher average number of fatalities indicates that further examination of these incidents, moving beyond a sole focus on “school shootings,” is warranted and necessary to better inform public policy.”⁷ Secondly, the success of mass shootings is often associated with failures of currently implemented gun control policies, including background checks and inspections of reported ‘red flags’ on the mental state of gun owners.⁸ This makes the implementation of additional policies useless in terms of addressing the problem of mass shootings—at least until policies that are already in place are executed properly.

Finally, the core problem of violent crimes leading to deaths by firearms remains. In this area of research, there are little-to-no means to execute an unambiguous experiment. Thus, the data on effects of various gun control policies remain contradictory. For example, a research

⁷ Agnich, Laura E. "A comparative analysis of attempted and completed school-based mass murder attacks." *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 40, no. 1 (2015), 18.

⁸ Redding, Richard E., and Sarah M. Shalf. "The legal context of school violence: The effectiveness of federal, state, and local law enforcement efforts to reduce gun violence in schools." *Law & Policy* 23, no. 3 (2001): 297-343.

study on an Australian governmental program of gun buyback is often quoted as a successful means of fighting crime through gun control, since the decrease of the number of guns in the country correlates with a decrease in crimes that previously were associated with using firearms (i.e. armed robbery) in relation to those that traditionally do not (i.e. sexual assault).⁹ This research, however, tends to ignore either a universal diminishing of violent crimes in developed countries in the last thirty years that is associated with the rapid decrease of universal poverty or the contribution of legal gun-ownership as a preventive measure against crimes that do not involve guns.

This state of affairs confirms the most common sentiments of American pro-gun activists. In this manner, Kleck reports that crimes that traditionally do not involve firearms are much less likely in states of the US where open carry laws are implemented.¹⁰ Considering that stricter gun control usually results in an increase of illegal gun ownership as well as non-firearm related crimes, there is an argument to be made that the lack of lack firearms leave citizens defenseless and thus increase the chances for the success of an attempted assault.¹¹ However, due to the lack of control over the variables, it is nearly impossible for researchers either to confirm or to refute the arguments of gun ownership as a safety measure as a contributing factor in violent crime prevention. While it is the case, a meta-study conducted by Lee et al. suggests: "The overall evidence from 12 studies supports the conclusion that laws that strengthen background checks and that require a permit to purchase a firearm are associated with a decrease in firearm

⁹ Taylor, Benjamin, and Jing Li. "Do fewer guns lead to less crime? Evidence from Australia." *International review of law and economics* 42 (2015): 72-78.

¹⁰ Kleck, Gary. "The impact of gun ownership rates on crime rates: A methodological review of the evidence." *Journal of criminal justice* 43, no. 1 (2015): 46-47.

¹¹ *ibid*, 48.

homicides.”¹² This conclusion is probably the only gun proposal that is empirically proven to be sound and is supported by both sides of the political aisle.

To conclude, longer and more rigorous background checks on firearms purchasers appear to be the most useful policy in terms of preventing gun-related violence, including both criminal assaults and successful attempts at suicide. As for other policies, the evidence on the relations between laws on gun ownership and crime rates in any specific region are inconclusive due to a lack of control over other factors contributing to criminal activity. Regardless of this, an agreement on the necessity of stricter and more efficient background checks would be a major political advancement in gun control debates—especially as it seems to be a position shared by gun control activists and responsible gun owners alike.

¹² Lee, Lois K., Eric W. Fleegler, Caitlin Farrell, Elorm Avakame, Saranya Srinivasan, David Hemenway, and Michael C. Monuteaux. "Firearm laws and firearm homicides: a systematic review." *JAMA internal medicine* 177, no. 1 (2017), 112.

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