

24. How to Reduce Shootings

By Nicholas Kristof, New York Times, May 18, 2018

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10 Dead in Santa Fe, Texas, School Shooting; Suspect Used Shotgun and Revolver

Inevitably, predictably, fatefully, another mass shooting breaks our hearts. This time, it is a school shooting in Texas.

But what is perhaps most heartbreaking of all is that they shouldn't be shocking. People all over the world become furious and try to harm others, but only in the United States do we suffer such mass shootings so regularly; only in the United States do we lose one person every 15 minutes to gun violence.

So let's not just mourn the dead, let's not just lower flags and make somber speeches. Let's also learn lessons from these tragedies, so that there can be fewer of them. In particular, I suggest that we try a new approach to reducing gun violence — a public health strategy.

America Has More Guns Than Any Other Country

The first step is to understand the scale of the challenge America faces: The U.S. has more than 300 million guns – roughly one for every citizen – and stands out as well for its gun death rates. At the other extreme, Japan has less than one gun per 100 people, and typically fewer than 10 gun deaths a year in the entire country.

We Have a Model for Regulating Guns: Automobiles

Gun enthusiasts often protest: Cars kill about as many people as guns, and we don't ban them! No, but automobiles are actually a model for the public health approach I'm suggesting.

We don't ban cars, but we work hard to regulate them – and limit access to them – so as to reduce the death toll they cause. This has been spectacularly successful, reducing the death rate per 100 million miles driven by 95 percent since 1921.

A better framing is “gun safety” or “reducing gun violence,” and using auto safety as a model—constant efforts to make the products safer and to limit access by people who are most likely to misuse them.

What would a public health approach look like for guns if it were modeled after cars? It would include:

- **Background Checks:** 22 percent of guns are obtained without one.
- **Protection Orders:** Keep men who are subject to domestic violence protection orders from having guns.
- **Ban Under-21s:** A ban on people under 21 purchasing firearms (this is already the case in many states).
- **Safe Storage:** These include trigger locks as well as guns and ammunition stored separately, especially when children are in the house.
- **Purchases:** Tighter enforcement of laws on purchases of weapons for other people, and some limits on how many guns can be purchased in a month.
- **Ammunition Checks:** Experimentation with a background check for anybody buying ammunition.
- **End Immunity:** End immunity for firearm companies. That's a subsidy to a particular industry.
- **Ban Bump Stocks:** A ban on bump stocks of the kind used in Las Vegas to mimic automatic weapon fire.
- **'Smart Guns':** "Smart guns" fire only after a fingerprint or PIN is entered, or if used near a particular bracelet.

If someone steals my iPhone, it's useless, and the same should be true of guns. Gun manufacturers made child-proof guns back in the 19th century (before dropping them), and it's time to advance that technology today. Some combination of smart guns and safe storage would also reduce the number of firearms stolen in the U.S. each year, now about 200,000, and available to criminals.

We also need to figure out whether gun buybacks, often conducted by police departments, are cost-effective and help reduce violence. And we can experiment more with anti-gang initiatives, such as Cure Violence, that have a good record in reducing shootings.

Tightening Gun Laws Lowered Firearm Homicide Rates

For skeptics who think that gun laws don't make a difference, consider what happened in two states, Missouri and Connecticut. In 1995, Connecticut tightened licensing laws, while in 2007 Missouri eased gun laws.

The upshot? After tightening gun laws, firearm homicide rates dropped 40 percent in Connecticut. And after Missouri eased gun laws, gun homicide rates rose 25 percent.

One of the lessons of gun research is that we often focus just on firearms themselves, when it may be more productive to focus on who gets access to them. A car or gun is usually safe in the hands of a 45-year-old woman with no criminal record, but may be

dangerous when used by a 19-year-old felon with a history of alcohol offenses or domestic violence protection orders. In many places, there is more rigorous screening of people who want to adopt dogs than of people who want to purchase firearms.

In these two states, the laws affected access, and although there's some indication that other factors were also involved in Connecticut (and correlations don't prove causation), the outcomes are worth pondering.

There Is a Shocking Lack of Research on Guns

There's simply a scandalous lack of research on gun violence, largely because the N.R.A. is extremely hostile to such research and Congress rolls over. When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention did try to research gun violence, Congress responded by cutting its funding.

It may sometimes seem hopeless to make progress on gun violence, especially with the N.R.A. seemingly holding Congress hostage. But I'm more optimistic.

Look, we all agree on some kinds of curbs on guns. Nobody believes that people should be able to drive a tank down Main Street, or have an anti-aircraft gun in the backyard. I've been to parts of northern Yemen where one could actually buy a tank or an anti-aircraft gun, as well as fully automatic weapons — and that area's now embroiled in a civil war — but fortunately in America we have agreed to ban those kinds of weaponry.

So the question isn't whether we will restrict firearms, but where to draw the line and precisely which ones to restrict.

Check out these polling numbers as a basis for action on gun safety:

A majority of gun owners and the vast majority of people who don't own guns agree with:

- Background checks for all gun buyers
 - Preventing the mentally ill from buying guns
 - Nationwide ban on the sale of guns to people convicted of violent crimes
 - Barring gun purchases by people on no-fly or watch lists
 - Background checks for private sales and at gun shows
 - Federal mandatory waiting period on all gun purchases
 - A ban on modifications that make a semi-automatic gun work like an automatic gun
 - A ban gun sales to people convicted of violent crimes would reduce gun violence
 - New gun laws will not interfere with the right to own guns
 - Congress is not doing enough to reduce gun violence
 - Creating a federal database to track gun sales
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