

Gun Ownership with Stricter Controls Could Reduce Gun Violence

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From *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*

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Further gun-control measures in the [United States](#) will have limited effects because of the hundreds of millions of guns that already exist in private hands. The debate now is about the impact of law-abiding citizens carrying [concealed weapons](#). Although antigun activists claim that concealed-carry laws would increase violence, there is no evidence that they do. Situations such as shootings on campus raise the question of whether properly trained students carrying [firearms](#) could actually decrease the possibility of and impact of such shootings.

According to a 2011 Gallup poll, 47 percent of American adults keep at least one gun at home or on their property, and many of these gun owners are absolutists opposed to any government regulation of firearms. According to the same poll, only 26 percent of Americans support a ban on handguns.

The Call for Gun Control

To that 26 percent, American gun culture can seem utterly inexplicable, its very existence dispiriting. Guns are responsible for roughly 30,000 deaths a year in America; more than half of those deaths are suicides. In 2010, 606 people, 62 of them children younger than 15, died in accidental shootings.

[Gun-control activist Tom] Mauser expresses disbelief that the number of gun deaths fails to shock. He blames the American attachment to guns on ignorance, and on immaturity. "We're a pretty new nation," he told me. "We're still at the stage of rebellious teenager, and we don't like it when the government tells us what to do. People don't trust government to do what's right. They are very attracted to the idea of a nation of individuals, so they don't think about what's good for the collective."

Mauser said that if the United States were as mature as the countries of Europe, where strict [gun control](#) is the norm, the federal government would have a much easier time curtailing the average citizen's access to weapons. "The people themselves would understand that having guns around puts them in more danger."

Gun-control efforts ... would only have a modest impact on the rate of [gun violence](#) in America.

There are ways, of course, to make it at least marginally more difficult for the criminally minded, for the dangerously mentally ill, and for the suicidal to buy guns and ammunition. The gun-show loophole could be closed. Longer waiting periods might stop some suicides. Mental-health professionals could be encouraged—or mandated—to report patients they suspect shouldn't own guns to the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]-supervised National Instant Criminal Background Check System, although this would generate fierce opposition from doctors and patients. [Background checks](#), which

are conducted by licensed gun shops, have stopped almost 1 million people from buying guns at these stores since 1998. (No one knows, of course, how many of these people gave up their search for a gun, and how many simply went to a gun show or found another way to acquire a weapon.)

Other measures could be taken as well. Drum-style magazines like the kind James Holmes had that night [July 20, 2012] in Aurora [Colorado], which can hold up to 100 rounds of ammunition and which make continuous firing easy, have no reasonable civilian purpose, and their sale could be restricted without violating the Second Amendment rights of individual gun owners.

The Number of Guns in America

But these gun-control efforts, while noble, would only have a modest impact on the rate of gun violence in America.

Why?

Because it's too late.

There are an estimated 280 million to 300 million guns in private hands in America—many legally owned, many not. Each year, more than 4 million new guns enter the market. This level of gun saturation has occurred not because the anti-gun lobby has been consistently outflanked by its adversaries in the [National Rifle Association](#) [NRA], though it has been. The NRA is quite obviously a powerful organization, but like many effective pressure groups, it is powerful in good part because so many Americans are predisposed to agree with its basic message.

America's level of gun ownership means that even if the Supreme Court—which ruled in 2008 that the Second Amendment gives citizens the individual right to own firearms, as gun advocates have long insisted—suddenly reversed itself and ruled that the individual ownership of handguns was illegal, there would be no practical way for a democratic country to locate and seize those guns.

The Debate About Gun Ownership

Many gun-control advocates, and particularly advocates of a total gun ban, would like to see the United States become more like Canada, where there are far fewer guns per capita and where most guns must be registered with the federal government. The Canadian approach to [firearms ownership](#) has many attractions—the country's firearm [homicide](#) rate is one-sixth that of the U.S. But barring a decision by the American people and their legislators to remove the [right to bear arms](#) from the Constitution, arguing for applying the Canadian approach in the U.S. is useless.

Even the leading advocacy group for stricter [gun laws](#), the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, has given up the struggle to convince the courts, and the public, that the Constitution grants only members of a militia the right to bear arms. "I'm happy to consider the debate on the Second Amendment closed," Dan Gross, the Brady Campaign's president, told me recently. "Reopening that

debate is not what we should be doing. We have to respect the fact that a lot of decent, law-abiding people believe in gun ownership."

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Which raises a question: When even anti-gun activists believe that the debate over private gun ownership is closed; when it is too late to reduce the number of guns in private hands—and since only the naive think that legislation will prevent more than a modest number of the criminally minded, and the mentally deranged, from acquiring a gun in a country absolutely inundated with weapons—could it be that an effective way to combat guns is with more guns?

Today, more than 8 million vetted and (depending on the state) trained law-abiding citizens possess state-issued "concealed carry" handgun permits, which allow them to carry a concealed handgun or other weapon in public. Anti-gun activists believe the expansion of concealed-carry permits represents a serious threat to public order. But what if, in fact, the reverse is true? Mightn't allowing more law-abiding private citizens to carry concealed weapons—when combined with other forms of stringent gun regulation—actually reduce gun violence?...

The Impact of Concealed-Carry Guns

There is no proof to support the idea that concealed-carry permit holders create more violence in society than would otherwise occur; they may, in fact, reduce it. According to Adam Winkler, a law professor at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] and the author of *Gunfight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America*, permit holders in the U.S. commit crimes at a rate lower than that of the general population. "We don't see much bloodshed from concealed-carry permit holders, because they are law-abiding people," Winkler said. "That's not to say that permit holders don't commit crimes, but they do so at a lower rate than the general population. People who seek to obtain permits are likely to be people who respect the law." According to John Lott, an economist and a gun-rights advocate who maintains that gun ownership by law-abiding citizens helps curtail crime, the crime rate among concealed-carry permit holders is lower than the crime rate among police officers.

Today, the number of concealed-carry permits is the highest it's ever been, at 8 million, and the homicide rate is the lowest it's been in four decades—less than half what it was 20 years ago. (The number of people allowed to carry concealed weapons is actually considerably higher than 8 million, because residents of Vermont, Wyoming, Arizona, Alaska, and parts of Montana do not need government permission to carry their personal firearms. These states have what Second Amendment absolutists refer to as "constitutional carry," meaning, in essence, that the Second Amendment is their permit.)

Many gun-rights advocates see a link between an increasingly armed public and a decreasing crime rate. "I think effective [law enforcement](#) has had the biggest impact on crime rates, but I think concealed carry has something to do with it. We've seen an explosion in the number of people licensed to carry," Lott told me. "You can deter criminality through longer sentencing, and you deter criminality by making it riskier for people to commit crimes. And one way to make it riskier is to create

the impression among the criminal population that the law-abiding citizen they want to target may have a gun."

The brandishing of a gun in front of a would-be mugger or burglar is usually enough to abort a crime in progress.

Crime statistics in Britain, where guns are much scarcer, bear this out. Gary Kleck, a criminologist at Florida State University, wrote in his 1991 book, *Point Blank: Guns and Violence in America*, that only 13 percent of burglaries in America occur when the occupant is home. In Britain, so-called hot burglaries account for about 45 percent of all break-ins. Kleck and others attribute America's low rate of occupied-home burglaries to fear among [criminals](#) that homeowners might be armed. (A survey of almost 2,000 convicted U.S. felons, conducted by the criminologists Peter Rossi and James D. Wright in the late '80s, concluded that burglars are more afraid of armed homeowners than they are of arrest by the police.)

Others contend that proving causality between crime rates and the number of concealed-carry permits is impossible. "It's difficult to make the case that more concealed-carry guns have led to the drop in the national crime rate, because cities like Los Angeles, where we have very restrictive gun-control laws, have seen the same remarkable drop in crime," Winkler told me. (Many criminologists tend to attribute America's dramatic decrease in violent crime to a combination of demographic changes, longer criminal sentencing, innovative policing techniques, and the waning of the crack wars.)

But it is, in fact, possible to assess with some degree of accuracy how many crimes have been stopped because the intended victim, or a witness, was armed. In the 1990s, Gary Kleck and a fellow criminologist, Marc Gertz, began studying the issue and came to the conclusion that guns were used defensively between 830,000 and 2.45 million times each year.

In only a minority of these cases was a gun fired; the brandishing of a gun in front of a would-be mugger or burglar is usually enough to abort a crime in progress. Another study, the federal government's National Crime Victimization Survey, asked victims of crimes whether they, or someone else, had used a gun in their defense. This study came up with a more modest number than Kleck and Gertz, finding 108,000 defensive uses of firearms a year.

All of these studies, of course, have been contested by gun-control advocates. So I asked Winkler what he thought. He said that while he is skeptical of the 2.45 million figure, even the smaller number is compelling: 108,000 "would represent a significant reduction in criminal activity."

University Recommendations for Shootings

Universities, more than most other institutions, are nearly unified in their prohibition of licensed concealed-carry weapons. Some even post notices stating that their campuses are gun-free zones. At the same time, universities also acknowledge that they are unable to protect their students from lethal assault. How do they do this? By recommending measures that students and faculty members can take if confronted by an "active shooter," as in the massacre at Virginia Tech [April 16, 2007, in Blacksburg, Virginia].

These recommendations make for depressing reading, and not only because they reflect a world in which random killing in tranquil settings is a genuine, if rare, possibility. They are also depressing because they reflect a denial of reality.

Here are some of the recommendations:

- Wichita State University counsels students in the following manner: "If the person(s) is causing death or serious physical injury to others and you are unable to run or hide you may choose to be compliant, play dead, or fight for your life."
- The University of Miami guidelines suggest that when all else fails, students should act "as aggressively as possible" against a shooter. The guidelines, taken from a Department of Homeland Security directive, also recommend "throwing items and improvising weapons," as well as "yelling."
- Otterbein University, in Ohio, tells students to "breathe to manage your fear" and informs them, "You may have to take the offensive if the shooter(s) enter your area. Gather weapons (pens, pencils, books, chairs, etc.) and mentally prepare your attack."
- West Virginia University advises students that if the situation is dire, they should "act with physical aggression and throw items at the active shooter." These items could include "student desks, keys, shoes, belts, books, cell phones, iPods, book bags, laptops, pens, pencils, etc."
- The University of Colorado at Boulder's guidelines state, "You and classmates or friends may find yourselves in a situation where the shooter will accost you. If such an event occurs, quickly develop a plan to attack the shooter.... Consider a plan to tackle the shooter, take away his weapon, and hold him until police arrive."

It is, of course, possible to distract a heavily armed psychotic on a [suicide](#) mission by throwing an iPod at him, or a pencil. But it is more likely that the psychotic would respond by shooting the pencil thrower.

Publicly describing your property as gun-free is analogous to posting a notice on your front door saying your home has no burglar alarm.

The Dangers of Gun-Free Campuses

The existence of these policies suggests that universities know they cannot protect their students during an armed attack. (At Virginia Tech, the gunman killed 30 students and faculty members in the 10 minutes it took the police to arrive and penetrate the building he had blockaded.) And yet, these schools will not allow adults with state-issued concealed-carry permits to bring their weapons onto campus, as they would be able to almost anywhere else. "Possession or storage of a deadly weapon, destructive device, or fireworks in any form ... is prohibited," West Virginia University's policy states.

To gun-rights advocates, these policies are absurd. "The fact that universities are providing their faculties and students with this sort of information is, of course, an admission that they can't protect them," Dave Kopel [research director of the Independence Institute] told me. "The universities are unable to protect people, but then they disable people from protecting themselves."

It is also illogical for campuses to advertise themselves as "gun-free." Someone bent on [murder](#) is not usually dissuaded by posted anti-gun regulations. Quite the opposite—publicly describing your

property as gun-free is analogous to posting a notice on your front door saying your home has no burglar alarm. As it happens, the company that owns the Century 16 Cineplex in Aurora had declared the property a gun-free zone.

"As a security measure, it doesn't seem like advertising that fact is a good idea," Adam Winkler says of avowedly gun-free campuses, though he adds that "advertising a school's gun-free status does provide notice to potentially immature youth that they're not allowed to have guns."

The Concern for Campus Safety

In Colorado, the epicenter of the American gun argument, the state supreme court recently ruled that the University of Colorado must lift its ban on the carrying of concealed handguns by owners who have been licensed by local sheriffs. (The university has responded by requiring students who own guns to move to a specified housing complex.) The ruling has caused anxiety among some faculty. The chairman of the faculty assembly, a physics professor named Jerry Peterson, told the Boulder *Daily Camera*, "My own personal policy in my classes is if I am aware that there is a firearm in the class—registered or unregistered, concealed or unconcealed—the class session is immediately canceled. I want my students to feel unconstrained in their discussions."

Peterson makes two assumptions: The first is that he will know whether someone is carrying a concealed weapon in class. The second is that students will feel frightened about sharing their opinions if a gun is present. (I could find no evidence that any American educational institution has ever seen fatalities or serious gun-related injuries result from a heated classroom discussion.)

Claire Levy, a Colorado state legislator, says she intends to introduce a bill that would ban guns once again. "If discussions in class escalated," she argues, "the mere fact that someone is potentially armed could have an inhibiting effect on the classroom. This is genuinely scary to faculty members." The push to open up campuses to concealed-carry permit holders, Levy says, is motivated by ideological gun-rights advocacy, rather than an actual concern for campus [safety](#). Guns, even those owned by licensed and trained individuals, she insists, would simply make a campus more dangerous. "American campuses are the safest places to be in the whole world," she said. "The homicide rate on campuses is a small fraction of the rate in the rest of the country. So there's no actual rational public-safety reason that anyone would need to bring a gun on campus."

However, the University of Colorado's own active-shooter recommendations state:

Active harming incidents have occurred at a number of locations in recent years, and the University of Colorado is not immune to this potential. While the odds of this occurring at CU are small, the consequences are so potentially catastrophic it makes sense for all students, staff, faculty and visitors to CU to consider the possibility of such an incident occurring here.

In making her argument against concealed-carry weapons to me, Levy painted a bit of a contradictory picture: On the one hand, campuses are the safest places in the country. On the other hand, campus life is so inherently dangerous that the introduction of even licensed guns could mean mayhem. "You're in this milieu of drugs and alcohol and impulsive behavior and mental illness; you've got a population that has a high propensity for suicide," she told me. "Theft is a big concern, and what if you

had a concealed-carry gun and you're drinking and become violent?"...

Anti-gun advocates ... should acknowledge that gun-control legislation is not the only answer to gun violence.

A Balanced Approach to Gun Control

The ideology of gun-ownership absolutism doesn't appeal to me. Unlike hard-line gun-rights advocates, I do not believe that unregulated gun ownership is a defense against the rise of totalitarianism in America, because I do not think that America is ripe for totalitarianism. (Fear of a tyrannical, gun-seizing president is the reason many gun owners oppose firearms registration.)

But I am sympathetic to the idea of armed self-defense, because it does often work, because encouraging learned helplessness is morally corrupt, and because, however much I might wish it, the United States is not going to become Canada. Guns are with us, whether we like it or not. Maybe this is tragic, but it is also reality. So Americans who are qualified to possess firearms shouldn't be denied the right to participate in their own defense. And it is empirically true that the great majority of America's tens of millions of law-abiding gun owners have not created chaos in society.

A balanced approach to gun control in the United States would require the warring sides to agree on several contentious issues. Conservative gun-rights advocates should acknowledge that if more states had stringent universal background check—or if a federal law put these in place—more guns would be kept out of the hands of criminals and the dangerously mentally unstable. They should also acknowledge that requiring background checks on buyers at gun shows would not represent a threat to the Constitution. "The NRA position on this is a fiction," says Dan Gross, the head of the Brady Campaign. "Universal background checks are not an infringement on our Second Amendment rights. This is black-helicopter stuff." Gross believes that closing the gun-show loophole would be both extremely effective and a politically moderate and achievable goal. The gun lobby must also agree that concealed-carry permits should be granted only to people who pass rigorous criminal checks, as well as thorough training-and-safety courses.

Anti-gun advocates, meanwhile, should acknowledge that gun-control legislation is not the only answer to gun violence. Responsible gun ownership is also an answer. An enormous number of Americans believe this to be the case, and gun-control advocates do themselves no favors when they demonize gun owners, and advocates of armed self-defense, as backwoods barbarians. Liberals sometimes make the mistake of anthropomorphizing guns, ascribing to them moral characteristics they do not possess. Guns can be used to do evil, but guns can also be used to do good. Twelve years ago, in the aftermath of Matthew Shepard's murder [1998 in Wyoming], Jonathan Rauch launched a national movement when he wrote an article for *Salon* arguing that gay people should arm themselves against violent bigots. Pink Pistol clubs sprang up across America, in which gays and lesbians learn to use firearms in self-defense. Other vulnerable groups have also taken to the idea of concealed carry: in Texas, African American women represent the largest percentage increase of concealed-carry permit seekers since 2000.

But even some moderate gun-control activists, such as Dan Gross, have trouble accepting that guns in

private hands can work effectively to counteract violence. When I asked him the question I posed to Stephen Barton [victim of shooting at Century 16 Cineplex in Aurora, Colorado in July 2012] and Tom Mausers—would you, at a moment when a stranger is shooting at you, prefer to have a gun, or not?—he answered by saying, "This is the conversation the gun lobby wants you to be having." He pointed out some of the obvious flaws in concealed-carry laws, such as too-lax training standards and too much discretionary power on the part of local law-enforcement officials. He did say that if concealed-carry laws required background checks and training similar to what police recruits undergo, he would be slower to raise objections. But then he added: "In a fundamental way, isn't this a question about the kind of society we want to live in?" Do we want to live in one "in which the answer to violence is more violence, where the answer to guns is more guns?"

What Gross won't acknowledge is that in a nation of nearly 300 million guns, his question is irrelevant.

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