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The Case for More Guns (and More Gun Control)

How do we reduce gun crime and Aurora-style mass shootings when Americans already own nearly 300 million firearms? Maybe by allowing more people to carry them.



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THE CENTURY 16 Cineplex in Aurora, Colorado, stands desolate behind a temporary green fence, which was raised to protect the theater from prying eyes and mischief-makers. The parking lots that surround the multiplex are empty—weeds are pushing through the asphalt—and the only person at the theater when I visited a few weeks ago was an enervated Aurora police officer assigned to guard the site.

I asked the officer whether the building, which has stood empty since the night of

July 20, when a former graduate student named James E. Holmes is alleged to have killed 12 people and wounded 58 others at a midnight showing of *The Dark Knight Rises*, still drew the curious. “People drive by to look,” he said, but “not too many.” The Aurora massacre is noteworthy, even in the crowded field of mass shootings, as one of the more wretched and demoralizing in the recent history of American violence, and I was surprised that the scene of the crime did not attract more attention. “I guess people move on,” he said.

I walked up a slight rise that provided an imperfect view of the back of Theater 9, where the massacre took place, and tried to imagine the precise emotions the victims felt as the gunfire erupted.

“The shooting started at a quiet moment in the movie,” Stephen Barton told me. He was shot in the opening fusillade. “I saw this canister-type thing, a smoking object, streak across the screen. I thought it was a kid with fireworks playing a prank.”

Barton is 22 years old. He had been preparing to leave for Russia this fall on a Fulbright scholarship. “The first feeling I remember was bewilderment. I don’t remember having a single thought before I was shot, because I was shot early on. I was sitting in the middle of the row, toward the back. I got blasted in my head, neck, and face—my whole upper body—by shotgun pellets.”

As he lay wounded on the floor by his seat, he said, his bafflement gave way to panic. “I had this unwillingness to accept that this was actually happening. I wanted to believe that there was no way that someone in the same room as me was shooting at people,” he said. “So it was disbelief and also this really strong feeling that I’m not ready to die. I’m at someone else’s mercy. I’ve never felt more helpless.”

In the chaos of smoke and gunshots, Barton saw the emergency exit door open, and managed to escape into the parking lot. “If I hadn’t seen that door, I might not have made it,” he said.

I LEFT THE THEATER and drove into Denver, to meet a man named Tom Mauser, who lost a son in the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School, 19 miles from the Aurora theater.

Daniel Mauser, who was 15 years old when he died, tried to hide from the Columbine killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. Harris found the boy under a table in the school library. A classmate told *The Denver Post* shortly after the massacre, “Eric shot him once, and Daniel pushed chairs at him to try to make him stop, and Eric shot him again.”

After the murder of his son, Tom Mauser became a gun-control activist. In the days after Columbine, advocates of more-stringent controls of firearms thought they could feel a shift in the culture. People were disgusted that Harris and Klebold, neither of whom was of the legal age to buy firearms, had found a way to acquire guns: an 18-year-old woman, a friend of the two shooters, bought three weapons legally at a gun show, where federal background checks were not required.

After Columbine, Colorado closed its “gun-show loophole,” but efforts to close the loophole on the national level failed. The National Rifle Association and other anti-gun-control groups worked diligently to defend the loophole —misnamed, because while *loophole* suggests a small opening not easily negotiated, about 40 percent of all legal gun sales take place at gun shows, on the Internet, or through more-informal sales between private sellers and buyers, where buyers are not subject to federal background checks. Though anti-loophole legislation passed the U.S. Senate, it was defeated in the House of Representatives. On top of that, the 1994 ban on sales of certain types of semiautomatic weapons, known as the assault-weapons ban, expired in 2004 and was not reauthorized.

After the Aurora shooting, gun-control activists who expected politicians to rise up in outrage were quickly disappointed. Shortly after the massacre, John Hickenlooper, the Democratic governor of Colorado, suggested that stricter gun laws would not have stopped the shooter. “If there were no assault weapons available and no this or no that, this guy is going to find something, right?” Hickenlooper said. “He’s going to know how to create a bomb.”

Hickenlooper’s statement helped Mauser realize that his side was losing the fight. “I had deep anger when I heard that,” he told me. “I heard the same kinds of statements from some people after Columbine: ‘Well, you know, they had bombs, too.’ The fact is that the deaths were from guns.”

Mauser believes the public has grown numb to mass violence. “People say ‘How tragic’ and then move on,” he said. “They’re told by their governor, their political leaders, that there’s no solution. So they don’t see a solution out there.”

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.

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.

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.”

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-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 in Aurora, 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.

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, 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.

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.”

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?

THIS THOUGHT HAS been with me for nearly two decades. On December 7, 1993, a bitter and unstable man named Colin Ferguson boarded an eastbound Long Island Rail Road train at the Jamaica, Queens, station. As the train pulled into the Merillon Avenue station in Nassau County, Ferguson pulled out a Ruger 9 mm pistol he had bought legally in California (which had a 15-day waiting period) and began walking down the aisle, calmly shooting passengers as he went. He killed six people and wounded 19 others before three passengers tackled him while he was reloading.

If someone is shooting at you, it is better to shoot back than to cower and pray.

I had been an LIRR commuter not long before this happened, and I remember clearly my reaction to the slaughter, and I remember as well the reaction of many New York politicians. Much of the political class, and many editorialists, were of the view that the LIRR massacre proved the need for stricter gun control, and even for the banning of handguns. I shared—and continue to share—the view that muscular gun-control regulations, ones that put stumbling blocks in front of criminals seeking firearms, are necessary. But I was also seized by the thought that, had I been on the train, I would much rather have been armed than unarmed. I was not, and am not, under the illusion that a handgun would have necessarily provided a definitive solution to the problem posed by Colin Ferguson. But my instinct was that if someone is shooting at you, it is generally better to shoot back than to cower and pray.

Would a civilian firing back at Ferguson have wounded or killed innocent people? Quite possibly yes. Is that a risk potential victims quaking under train seats or classroom desks might accept? Quite possibly yes. Especially when you consider the massacres that have been prevented or interrupted by armed civilians before the police arrived.

Many of the worst American massacres end not in the capture of the gunman but in his suicide. In the 2007 mass shooting at Virginia Tech, for instance, the gunman, Seung-Hui Cho, killed himself as the police were set to capture him. But in other cases, massacres were stopped early by the intervention of armed civilians, or off-duty or retired police officers who happened to be nearby.

In 1997, a disturbed high-school student named Luke Woodham stabbed his

mother and then shot and killed two people at Pearl High School in Pearl, Mississippi. He then began driving toward a nearby junior high to continue his shooting spree, but the assistant principal of the high school, Joel Myrick, aimed a pistol he kept in his truck at Woodham, causing him to veer off the road. Myrick then put his pistol to Woodham's neck and disarmed him. On January 16, 2002, a disgruntled former student at the Appalachian School of Law in Grundy, Virginia, had killed three people, including the school's dean, when two students, both off-duty law-enforcement officers, retrieved their weapons and pointed them at the shooter, who ended his killing spree and surrendered. In December 2007, a man armed with a semiautomatic rifle and two pistols entered the New Life Church in Colorado Springs and killed two teenage girls before a church member, Jeanne Assam—a former Minneapolis police officer and a volunteer church security guard—shot and wounded the gunman, who then killed himself.

And so I put a question to Stephen Barton, who described feeling helpless in the Aurora theater: Would he rather have been armed, or at least been in the theater with armed patrons, when the massacre started?

“Intuitively it makes sense for people to have that reaction, to want to defend themselves,” he said. “It’s easy to say that if more people had guns to defend themselves, they could take criminals down, but I don’t think concealed-carry weapons are the answer.” In a dark and crowded theater, he said, facing someone wearing bullet-resistant armor on much of his body, a gun, even in trained hands, would have been unlikely to do much good.

I put to Tom Mauser a variation of the question I had asked Barton. What if a teacher or an administrator inside Columbine High School had been armed on the day of the massacre? Unlike the theater in Aurora, the school was brightly lit, and not as densely packed. If someone with a gun had confronted Harris and Klebold in the library, he or she would have been able, at the very least, to distract the killers—perhaps even long enough for them to be tackled or disarmed.

“That kind of speculation doesn’t solve anything,” Mauser said. “I don’t know if that person might have shot my son accidentally.”

But the worst thing that could have happened to Daniel Mauser did, in fact, happen. The presence in the Columbine library of a well-trained, armed civilian attempting to stop the killers could hardly have made the situation worse. Indeed, the local police—who waited 45 minutes to enter the school, while a SWAT team assembled—were severely criticized for the delay.

But Mauser remained implacable. “We know that if the country adopts this vision that everyone should be armed—that administrators and janitors in school are armed, that people are walking around armed—we won’t be safe,” Mauser told me. “In Aurora, if five people in that theater had guns, they could have just ended up shooting each other or innocent people in the crossfire. It just makes sense that if people are walking around armed, you’re going to have a high rate of people shooting each other.”

Earlier this year, a man who was upset with the anti-gay-rights position of the Family Research Council entered the group’s Washington, D.C., headquarters and allegedly shot and wounded the building manager (who subsequently tackled the gunman). At the time, Washington’s mayor, Vincent Gray, said: “We don’t need to make more guns available to people ... The more access they have, the more they threaten people.”

The District of Columbia does not allow for concealed carry, though its residents can now apply for a license allowing them to keep handguns at home, thanks to the 2008 Supreme Court ruling in a case brought on behalf of a D.C. man who wanted a gun for self-protection.

I called Gray to ask him about his assertion that more guns mean more violence, noting that he himself travels the city with armed police bodyguards, a service not afforded the typical Washington resident. “Well, first of all, I’ve never even seen the guns that the security people have. When I travel outside the city, I don’t have security. I would be fine without security,” he said. “But we have 3,800

police officers to protect people. They may not be at someone's side at every moment, but they're around."

Concealed-carry permit holders commit crimes at a lower rate than the general population.

I asked him whether he could envision a scenario in which an armed civilian might be able to stop a crime from occurring. "There are those who believe that if they have a weapon, they can combat crime, but I don't think that way," he said.

The police, of course, have guns to stop crime. So why couldn't a well-trained civilian also stop crime? "If you have a gun on you, that's just another opportunity to use it," Gray said. "It's the temptation of the moment. I just think the opportunity is there to create more violence."

In 2004, the Ohio legislature passed a law allowing private citizens to apply for permits to carry firearms outside the home. The decision to allow concealed carry was, of course, a controversial one. Law-enforcement organizations, among others, argued that an armed population would create chaos in the streets. In 2003, John Gilchrist, the legislative counsel for the Ohio Association of Chiefs of Police, testified, "If 200,000 to 300,000 citizens begin carrying a concealed weapon, common sense tells us that accidents will become a daily event."

When I called Gilchrist recently, he told me that events since the state's concealed-carry law took effect have proved his point. "Talking to the chiefs, I know that there is more gun violence and accidents involving guns," he said. "I

think there's more gun violence now because there are more guns. People are using guns in the heat of arguments, and there wouldn't be as much gun violence if we didn't have people carrying weapons. If you've got people walking around in a bad mood—or in a divorce, they've lost their job—and they get into a confrontation, this could result in the use of a gun. If you talk to emergency-room physicians in the state, [they] see more and more people with gunshot wounds.”

Gilchrist said he did not know the exact statistics on gun-related incidents (or on incidents concerning concealed-carry permit holders specifically, because the state keeps the names of permit holders confidential). He says, however, that he tracks gun usage anecdotally. “You can look in the newspaper. I consciously look for stories that deal with guns. There are more and more articles in *The Columbus Dispatch* about people using guns inappropriately.”

Gilchrist's argument would be convincing but for one thing: the firearm crime rate in Ohio remained steady after the concealed-carry law passed in 2004.

IT IS AN unexamined assumption on the part of gun-control activists that the possession of a firearm by a law-abiding person will almost axiomatically cause that person to fire it at another human being in a moment of stress. Dave Kopel, the research director of the libertarian-leaning Independence Institute, in Denver, posits that opposition to gun ownership is ideological, not rational. “I use gay marriage as an analogue,” he said. “Some people say they are against gay marriage because they think it leads to worse outcomes for kids. Now, let's say in 2020 all the social-science evidence has it that the kids of gay families turn out fine. Some people will still say they're against it, not for reasons of social science, but for reasons of faith. That's what you have here in the gun issue.”

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 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.”

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.)

Maybe it's possible to distract a heavily armed psychotic by throwing a pencil at him. But the psychotic would likely respond by shooting the pencil thrower.

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."

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.

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.

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 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.”

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?”

For much of the population of a typical campus, concealed-carry permitting is not an issue. Most states that issue permits will grant them only to people who are at least 21 years old. But the crime-rate statistics at universities that do allow

permit holders on campus with their weapons are instructive. An hour north of Boulder, in Fort Collins, sits Colorado State University. Concealed carry has been allowed at CSU since 2003, and according to James Alderden, the former sheriff of Larimer County, which encompasses Fort Collins, violent crime at Colorado State has dropped since then.

Despite the fact that CSU experienced no violent incidents involving concealed-carry permit holders, the university governing board voted two years ago to ban concealed carry. The ban never went into effect, however, because the state appeals court soon ruled against a similar ban at the University of Colorado, and because Sheriff Alderden announced that he would undermine the ban by refusing to process any violator in the county jail, which serves the university's police department.

Alderden, who recently retired, told me that opponents of concealed carry “make an emotional argument rather than a logical one. No one could show me any study that concealed carry leads to more crime and more violence. My idea of self-defense is not those red rape phones on campus, where you get to the phone and tell someone you're getting raped. I have a daughter, and I'd rather have her have the ability to defend herself. I'm not going to violate a citizen's right to self-defense because someone else has an emotional feeling about guns.”

Though Colorado is slowly shading blue, Alderden said he believes most of its residents “still don't rely on the government to protect them.” He added: “Maybe in Boulder they do, but most people believe they have a right to self-defense.”

BOULDER MAY BE the locus of left-wing politics in Colorado, but it is also home to the oversubscribed Boulder Rifle Club, which I visited on a bright early-fall morning with Dave Kopel, of the Independence Institute. The existence of the rifle club surprised me, given Boulder's reputation. But Kopel argued that gun ownership and sport shooting are not partisan phenomena, and he made the plausible assertion that Boulder is home to “the largest population of armed vegans in America.”

I wanted to understand from Kopel the best arguments against government intervention in gun ownership, and Kopel wanted to fire some of the many handguns he owns, so we alternately talked and shot. Kopel brought with him a bag of guns: a Ruger Mark II .22 LR pistol; a Springfield Armory XD-9 9 mm; a Glock 9 mm; a Springfield Armory 1911 tactical-response pistol (similar to a Colt .45); and a Ruger Alaskan .45 revolver, powerful enough to drop a bear. The Ruger Alaskan is the most powerful weapon we used, but the act of firing even a .22 underscores for most thinking people the notion that firing a gun is a serious business. Kopel argued that a law-abiding citizen is less likely to get into a confrontation after a traffic accident or an exchange of insults if he or she is carrying a weapon: “You’re aware of the power you have, and you naturally want to use that power very carefully.”

I expressed to Kopel my concern that the overly lax standards some states set for concealed-carry permitting means that the occasional cowboy gets passed through the system. Florida—which has among the most relaxed standards for gun permitting, and granted a license to George Zimmerman, who famously killed Trayvon Martin, apparently during an exercise in freelance vigilantism—is a case in point. (Zimmerman has pled not guilty, claiming he shot Martin in self-defense.) Applicants in Florida must submit to a background check, take a brief class, and pay \$112 to obtain a license.

In Colorado, the standards are slightly more stringent. Permit seekers must submit to criminal checks, fingerprinting, and safety classes, but in addition, they must pass what James Alderden referred to as the “naked man” rule: if a local sheriff learns that a person has no criminal record, and has not been deemed mentally ill, but nevertheless was, say, found naked one night in a field howling at the moon, the sheriff is granted the discretion to deny that person a permit.

Kopel argued, correctly, that Florida, like Colorado, has seen a drop in crime since 1987, when it started granting concealed-carry permits—which suggests to him that permit holders are not, in the main, engaging in crime sprees or taking the law into their own hands. But for Kopel, the rigor, or laxity, of the permitting

process from state to state is not his principal concern, because he believes that in most cases, the government has no right to interfere with an adult's decision to buy or carry a weapon. Those who seek to curtail gun rights, he insists, are promoting the infantilization of Americans.

“If they get their way,” he said of the anti-gun forces, “people who are the victims of violent crimes wouldn't be able to fight back; women who are abused couldn't protect themselves; criminals will know that their intended victims, who have no access to the black market, will be unable to defend themselves.

“It's more than that,” he went on. “Telling the population that they are incapable of owning a tool that can be dangerous means you are creating a population that loses its self-reliance and increasingly sees itself as wards of the state.”

James Alderden put it another way: “Your position on concealed-carry permits has a lot to do with your position on the reliability and sanity of your fellow man.”

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 checks—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, 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 and Tom Mauser

—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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