

Increased Civilian Gun Ownership Will Not Reduce Crime

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From *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*

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The argument that arming more civilians will help save lives is flawed. Experts criticize the claim that armed civilians can prevent [gun violence](#). Influential studies on the issue, purporting to support the argument that more guns lead to less crime, have been proven to be flawed. Guns owned by civilians are unlikely to be used effectively in a situation such as a mass shooting and, in fact, evidence points in the direction of more guns increasing the [suicide](#) and [homicide](#) rates.

By now, the response isn't even surprising. After a horrific massacre like the one in Newtown, Conn., last week [December 14, 2012], gun-rights advocates will argue that someone with a gun at the scene could have stopped the killer. They conclude that the answer to mass shootings is to arm more people.

The More Guns, Less Crime Argument

This argument is usually made by people who can be easily dismissed, like boffo U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Texas, or Larry Pratt, the executive director of Gun Owners of America. Pratt said this weekend that "[gun control](#) supporters have the blood of little [children](#) on their hands" for preventing law-abiding citizens from bringing guns into schools.

But the more guns/less crime argument shouldn't be dismissed so summarily. There's an undeniable intuitive logic to it—if you were facing down an active shooter, wouldn't you want to be armed? Nearly half of Americans keep a gun in their home—and the majority say the main reason they do so is to defend themselves. Across the country, states are expanding right to carry laws, which allow permitted citizens to carry [concealed weapons](#) for their own defense.

In this month's *Atlantic*, correspondent Jeffrey Goldberg set out to make the case in a smart and reasonable way that would be amenable to the kind of people who read the *Atlantic*. It's a fluke of timing that it hit newsstands just as Newtown reignited the gun debate. His massive 7,000-word feature, titled "The Case for More Guns (And More Gun Control)," makes a compelling argument in what could be called the "*Slate* pitch" genre of contrarian counternarratives that seek to provoke by challenging widely held, though rarely debated, assumptions. In this case, he questions whether more guns invariably lead to more gun violence.

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He advocates stricter gun restrictions like closing the gun show loophole and better training for people with concealed carry permits. But he concludes that with so many guns already in the hands of

Americans (over 300 million, or about one per person) and the police incapable of protecting us, the situation is pretty much hopeless—so we're probably better off arming ourselves and other law-abiding citizens so we can defend ourselves.

Now, before we go any further, it's worth noting that Goldberg, in an email exchange, insisted, "I'm not advocating the addition of more guns into the population." When I pointed out the title of his essay is "The Case for More Guns," he explained, "I didn't write the headline." Sure, but the implication of Goldberg's argument is clear to anyone who reads it. He says he's arguing that people should be able to "participate in their own defense" and that armed law-abiding citizens can be a part of the solution. Either way, the end result is exactly the same: more guns.

Critics of the More-Guns Approach

When I reached out to five of the country's most prominent researchers into gun violence, they were uniformly critical of the "more guns" approach and Goldberg's argument for what they saw as an ignorance of the overwhelming body of social science research that shows unequivocally that more guns equals more deaths. Some used nasty words like "garbage" and "atrocious."

"My first impression is that this essay should be used as a case study for high school and college debate teams across the country. It is one of the best crafted arguments for a particular position I have ever read," said Arthur Kellermann, a prominent [firearms safety](#) researcher now at the RAND Corp. But he also called the research cited "highly selective, and therefore misleading." "I am surprised that the editors didn't ask their national correspondent why he didn't bother to talk to at least one mainstream criminologist, policy analyst, physician or [public health](#) researcher."

Fred Rivara, an epidemiologist at the University of Washington, added in an email: "There is no data supporting his argument that the further arming of citizens will lessen the death toll in massacres like the one this week in Connecticut. There are in fact rigorous scientific data showing that having a gun in the home INCREASES the risk of violent death in the home."

Now, a huge problem when delving into gun safety research, as I wrote about in July [2012], is that Congress has suppressed, and in some cases explicitly outlawed, the use of government funds to research gun safety. Government funding is the largest source of basic scientific research like this, so the consequences of that decision are huge. Still, there is more than enough research out there to conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that more guns lead to more violence.

This *includes* people who have right-to-carry permits. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University recently conducted a review of all the existing academic literature on right-to-carry [RTC] and found: "The most consistent finding across studies which correct for these flaws is that RTC laws are associated with an increase in aggravated assaults." They estimated the increase to be about 1 to 9 percent, which may not sound like much—but with nearly 1 million aggravated assaults in the country every year, a small percentage change makes a big difference.

Researchers at Harvard have conducted numerous studies comparing data across states and

countries with different [gun laws](#) and concluded, quite simply, "Where there are more guns, there is more homicide."

Daniel Webster, the director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, explained in an interview: "It's hard to make the case, as some have done, that right-to-carry laws will lead to an enormous increase in violence. That does not appear to be the case. But it also does not appear to be the case that there is any beneficial effect."

"So if you want to argue that the reason we have so many mass shootings, the reason that the [United States](#) has a homicide rate about seven times higher than other developed countries, is because we don't allow enough concealed carry of firearms, the data just don't bear that out. And the thought experiment that you do is almost laughable," Webster added.

Colin Goddard, who became an advocate with the Brady Campaign after getting shot multiple times at the Virginia Tech shooting [April 16, 2007, in Blacksburg, Virginia], put it another way: "If more guns would lead to less crime, then why is America not the safest place in the world, with 300 million guns?"

Scholars sharply criticized [gun-rights advocate John Lott's] methodology for having "multiple very important flaws."

The Research of John Lott

Goldberg cites a number of studies that have become popular data points for gun-rights advocates. He also spoke with several academics of his own. One, whom he suggested I contact as well, is Adam Winkler of UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]. He is a constitutional lawyer, not a scientist. The other is [economist] John Lott.

No one has done more to advance the "More Guns, Less Crime" argument than Lott (that was the title of his book), so telling his story is unavoidable. To be fair, Goldberg does not rely on Lott's research and mostly cites him as a pro-gun activist and commentator, a role he's taken up since falling into academic disrepute.

Working as an economist at Yale and the University of Chicago in the 1990s, Lott published a series of articles and a book that argued, for example, that more than 1,500 murders, 4,000 rapes and 60,000 aggravated assaults "would have been avoided yearly" if more states adopted right-to-carry laws. The research immediately entered the public discourse and that paper became one of the most downloaded in the history of the Social Science Research Network repository.

But other scholars sharply criticized his methodology for having "multiple very important flaws." For instance, he ignored the crack epidemic that ravaged urban, non-right-to-carry states but avoided rural, pro-gun states. ("This would never have been taken seriously if it had not been obscured by a maze of equations," Rutgers sociologist Ted Goertzel wrote). Meanwhile, New York Democratic Sen. Chuck Schumer suggested Lott was a gun industry lackey because his salary was funded by a foundation created by the owner of one of the country's largest gun makers.

But the real controversy started in 2000 when Lott was unable to produce any records of a national survey he claimed to have conducted. He said he lost the data in a computer crash, but was unable to produce any other records or the names of students who helped him with it, leading some critics to speculate that he fabricated the entire thing. Even conservative blogger Michelle Malkin eviscerated Lott over the data mystery.

Lott took another blow in 2003 when Julian Sanchez, a fellow at the libertarian CATO Institute (no fan of gun control), revealed that Mary Rosh, one of Lott's most vociferous public defenders on the Internet, was actually an alter ego created by Lott to boost his work and harangue critics. "In most circles, this goes down as fraud," Donald Kennedy, the then-editor of the prestigious journal *Science* wrote in an editorial. Lott is now a Fox News contributor.

In 2004, the National Academy of Sciences conducted a literature review that included Lott's work, and found "no credible evidence that the passage of right-to-carry laws decreases or increases violent crime."

The Results of a Survey

If Lott's work can be discarded, the other key evidence for the more guns, less crime camp comes from criminologists Gary Kleck and Marc Gertz, whose work in the 1990s argued that there are between 800,000 and 2.5 million defensive uses of guns in America every year. The number has been widely touted by gun-rights activists, but strongly criticized by other scholars.

Indeed, studies commissioned by the Department of Justice using different sets of more rigorous data put the number at 83,000 or 108,000, alternatively. In his essay, Goldberg quickly abandons the 2.5 million figure and seems to settle on the 108,000 level, which is 23 times lower than the Kleck-Gertz top number.

Harvard economist David Hemenway has been especially critical of Kleck-Gertz, pointing out "serious methodological deficiencies" in their numbers. The data came from a national telephone survey of 5,000 households, which found that about .6 percent said they had used guns to defend themselves in the past year. Assuming that proportion held true for all Americans households, they extrapolated from their sample to find the 2.5 million figure.

Guns are used to threaten and intimidate far more often than they are used in self-defense.

Beyond the mathematical issues with that approach, and sampling problems in their survey, Hemenway said the researchers were too credulous in believing respondents. For instance, he pointed to a poll that found that 6 percent of Americans said they had had personal contact with aliens. "The ABC News/*Washington Post* data on aliens are as good as or better," Hemenway quipped.

But perhaps the biggest problem with the Kleck-Gertz numbers is that one person's self-defense is another person's [murder](#), as the case of George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin [shooting occurred

on February 26, 2012, in Sanford, [Florida](#)] demonstrated. Hemenway and a colleague conducted their own survey and then asked five criminal court judges to review their data to determine the legality of the incidents of defensive gun use reported by respondents. "A majority of the reported self-defense gun uses were rated as probably illegal by a majority of judges," they found.

The conclusion: "Guns are used to threaten and intimidate far more often than they are used in self-defense."

Kellermann said that citing Kleck and Gertz "while ignoring the work of [Philip J.] Cook, [Franklin] Zimring, [Richard] Rosenfeld, [J.] Ludwig, [L.W.] Sherman, [Garen J.] Wintemute, Hemenway, [Stephen] Teret, Webster, [Frederick P.] Rivara, Kellermann and others"—other gun researchers who had conflicting or newer data—is "intellectually dishonest."

The Problem of Mass Shootings

Then there's the question of looking at the gun issue through the lens of mass murders. Garen Wintemute, a public health researcher at the University of California, Davis, said in an interview that this leads to faulty conclusions. "Everybody is talking about how do we stop the next Sandy Hook [elementary school massacre in Newtown, Connecticut], but that's the totally wrong approach, because the next one will be totally different," he said.

More important, while mass shootings like the one in Newtown are always the catalyst for a debate over guns, they're a tiny fraction of the problem. There are about 20 mass shootings a year in this country, which altogether take the lives of perhaps several hundred people. But there were over 32,000 firearm-related deaths last year, the majority of which (almost 20,000) were suicides. There were also almost 850 accidental deaths from firearms. Among homicides, "far more common than mass killings are altercations where, because there is a gun available, someone ends up dead instead of a less lethal option," Wintemute said.

And this is the problem with focusing on how to stop mass killings: It ignores what happens when there isn't one. "Let's say we flood the country with guns. We put guns in every school, every hospital—more guns everywhere. This kind of thing happens about 20 times a year in the United States; what are the chances that any one of those guns is ever going to be used to help prevent or abort a [mass murder](#)? Vanishingly small," Wintemute said.

"The problem is not the gun being there at that almost impossibly rare moment; it's what happens to that gun all the rest of the time," he said. With the introduction of the gun, regardless of its purpose, we can expect more violent deaths, Wintemute explained. We know, for instance, that the mere presence of a gun inside a house is associated with a nearly fivefold increased risk of suicide and threefold increased risk in homicide, according to a 2004 paper published by Centers for Disease Control researchers in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*. (That finding has been replicated in numerous studies.)

"Now, if there was somehow a way that we could make a gun magically appear when it was needed,

and disappear otherwise, I think that's a good idea," Wintemute added with a laugh.

The Evidence on Armed Civilians

But let's look at armed civilians defending themselves in mass shooting situations, because this is perhaps the most emotionally compelling argument of the more guns, less crime camp.

There are certainly a number of cases in which an armed citizen stopped a mass murder, but they are few and far between. Very often in these cases, critics note, it is off-duty police officers and not average armed citizens who took action. Meanwhile, there are other cases in which an armed civilian proved *counterproductive*.

One case Goldberg cites is the shooting at Appalachian Law School [Grundy, Virginia] in 2002. In the Appalachian case, two off-duty police officers helped to subdue a shooter and ended up getting profiled in an NRA [[National Rifle Association](#)] magazine because of it. But it turns out the gunman was already out of ammunition and had dropped his firearm by the time they closed in on him with their weapons drawn. A police spokesman said that while the armed men were helpful, "the biggest heroes were [Ted] Besen and [Todd] Ross—the unarmed men who lunged at [the shooter]," the Kansas City Star reported.

It's kind of fantasy thinking to assume that armed citizens are going to take out the bad guy and that nothing will go wrong.

On the other hand, in the confusion after the shooting of former Rep. Gabrielle Giffords [January 8, 2011 in Tucson, Arizona], an armed citizen nearly shot the unarmed hero who had tackled alleged shooter Jared Loughner.

Often, guns are ineffective in these situations. At the mall shooting in Oregon earlier this month [December 2012], a right to carry permit holder was in the exact right place at the right time. He ducked behind a pillar, drew his handgun, and saw that the shooter was distracted as he tried to fix his rifle. But the man, 22-year-old Nick Meli, never pulled the trigger. "As I was going down to pull, I saw someone in the back of the Charlotte [store] move, and I knew if I fired and missed, I could hit them." he explained. After it was all over, he said he didn't regret his decision for a second.

Indeed, critics point out that civilians in an active-shooter environment might end up causing more harm than good by accidentally shooting innocent bystanders. "It's kind of fantasy thinking to assume that armed citizens are going to take out the bad guy and that nothing will go wrong," said Webster of Johns Hopkins.

Even police officers, who train endlessly for these kind of situations, make tragic mistakes all the time. In August [2012], NYPD [New York City Police Department] officers shot all nine of the innocent bystanders who were injured during a standoff with a gunman at the Empire State Building. Overall, officers hit their target in only about one out of every five shots, Webster said.

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how many guns are present.

The truth is that it's extremely difficult for anyone, let alone a lightly trained and inexperienced civilian, to effectively respond to a shooter. The entire episode can take a matter of seconds and your body is fighting against you: Under extreme stress, reaction time slows, heart rate increases and fine motor skills deteriorate. Police train to build muscle memory that can overcome this reaction, but the training wears off after only a few months if not kept up.

In 2009, ABC's *20/20* demonstrated the problem with a clever experiment. They recruited a dozen or so students, gave them gun training that was more comprehensive than what most states require for concealed carry permits, and then entrusted them with a gun and told them they would have to fend off a shooter later that day. Separating them, they placed each one in a real classroom with other "students" (actually study compatriots). When a gunman burst in and started shooting, each student tried to respond by drawing his or her gun. Every single student failed, including several who had had years of practice shooting guns, and they all got shot (fortunately, it was just paintball bullets in real handguns).

The Claim That Guns Save Lives

The truth, as difficult as it is to accept, is that it's often impossible to stop a shooter no matter how many guns are present. John Hinckley Jr. [in March 1982] managed to nearly kill [President] Ronald Reagan and permanently disable James Brady [press secretary] despite the fact that they were surrounded by dozens of heavily armed men with the best training imaginable. The only way to stop the incident would have been to prevent the offender from getting guns in the first place.

In an email exchange, Goldberg defended his essay and acknowledged the problem. "Of course the more guns there are, the more deaths you're going to have," he said. It's hard to square that admission with the rest of his argument, which favors expanding gun access. When I mentioned it to one of the researchers, he quipped that via the transitive property, Goldberg was arguing for more deaths.

But perhaps the biggest problem is the philosophy underpinning notions to arm more people. Goddard of the Brady campaign said it best in an interview: "The idea behind concealed carry is a kind of 'defend yourself and your family and f*** everybody else' mentality."

No serious person today is questioning the right of Americans to own guns, and without a doubt, you can find numerous cases in which guns have saved lives. But on balance, with the data available, it's close to impossible to make a convincing case that guns save lives. With 300 million guns already in circulation, it's hard to see a perfect solution, but encouraging more guns is certainly not the answer.

An unexpected bit of wisdom on this: Brad Dayspring, [US Congressman] Eric Cantor's former spokesman who now runs a GOP [Republican party] super PAC [political action committee], said on Twitter yesterday [December 2012], "The most effective way to avoid tragedies like this is not to start an arms race among teachers/students."

"America is not going to shoot our way out of the gun violence problem, and that's what these people are calling for. And I think that's dangerous and I think that will lead to more of us being killed by bullets," Goddard said.

Further Readings

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