

A New Year, A New Perspective: Reframing the National Dialogue on Gun Control and Gun Violence Research

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Keywords: gun control, Second Amendment, gun rights, public safety, ethics

INTRODUCTION

The New Year is a symbol of both continuity and rebirth. A new year serves as an important mile-marker, reminding us of our progress over the previous year and empowering us to carry on into the next one. A new year also offers a clean slate to start anew, providing an opportunity to reflect on how we can better ourselves and strive to achieve new feats. As we begin 2016, it is our hope that this New Year can be a symbol for not only our individual growth, but also for growth in our national dialogue on gun violence.

Gun violence, which includes both homicide and suicide, is an epidemic in the United States. Gun violence claims the lives of more than 30,000 Americans each year. [3] Since 1968, more Americans have been killed by guns than in all US wars combined from the American Revolution through the current Global War on Terrorism.[4] Deaths from gun violence far outnumber deaths by terrorism in the US and overseas.[5] American children are fourteen times more likely to die from firearm-related injuries on average than children in other developed nations.[6] In addition, with the frequency of deadly mass shootings in recent years,[7] the BBC commented on the horrific attack in San Bernardino, California, as “just another day in the United States of America. Another day of gunfire, panic and fear.”[8]

The toll of gun violence is unconscionable because it can be prevented, but there is very little that we can actually do about it because of a decades-long moratorium on federal funding for gun violence research. In December 2015, gun violence research became a heated topic of debate in congressional negotiations for this year’s federal budget and even raised the possibility of another “government shutdown.”[9] However, the rhetoric that this research threatens our Second Amendment right continues to persist after the federal spending bill once again passed without any appropriations for gun violence research.[10]

In this article, it is not our intention to dwell on traditional arguments and gridlock surrounding the moral standing of the right to bear arms. Instead, we seek to move the dialogue forward by arguing that if a society has the liberty to bear arms, then that society has a moral obligation to do all that it can to mitigate the harms that result from that freedom. In doing so, we aim to elucidate why federal funding for gun violence research is in the best interest of both gun owners and non-owners and why it is fundamental to making progress on one of the greatest ills in our society.

II. History of Federal Moratorium on Gun Violence Research

Historical support for undermining gun violence research is rooted in a misperception that such research is

no different from gun control advocacy.^[11] The moratorium on gun violence research was ratified by Congress in 1996, just years after a study funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) concluded that the ownership of guns in the home increased the risk for homicide by a family member or intimate acquaintance.^[12] Championed by Representative Jay Dickey (R-AK), Congress re-appropriated the \$2.6 million spent the previous year on gun violence research for research unrelated to guns. In addition, Congress included legislative language that stated, “None of the funds made available for injury prevention and control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention may be used to advocate or promote gun control.”^[13] While not an explicit ban on research, Arthur Kellerman, author of the controversial 1993 study, has stated that, “Precisely what was or was not permitted under the clause was unclear. But no federal employee was willing to risk his or her career or the agency's funding to find out. Extramural support for firearm injury prevention research quickly dried up.”^[14] More recently, in 2011, Congress applied similar language to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) after a study sponsored by the NIH concluded that individuals in possession of a firearm were more likely to be shot in an assault than those who were not.^[15]

Congressional efforts to stifle gun violence research have succeeded. Research to prevent firearm-related injury and death amounts to less than \$5 million annually, primarily coming from non-federal sources.^[16] Since 1996, CDC spending on gun violence research has fallen 96 percent to just \$100,000 of its nearly \$6 billion budget.^[17] In addition, this past year the NIH funded only two studies specifically focused on gun safety, totaling less than \$1 million of its more than \$30 billion budget.^[18] Meanwhile, gun violence is estimated to cost our nation at least \$229 billion in healthcare costs and lost productivity every year.^[19] The imperative to develop a new perspective on this long-standing issue could not be greater.

III. Reframing the National Dialogue on Gun Violence

Traditional ethical arguments on gun violence have centered on whether or not private ownership of firearms is a fundamental right. Fundamental rights are liberties that protect “fundamental interests” necessary for human flourishing and living a good life.^[20] Support for the fundamental nature of the right to bear arms follows the rationale that we have a fundamental interest in self-defense and that guns are the best means to protect this interest.^[21] Conversely, others argue that unrestricted access to guns is not necessary for self-defense.^[22] The non-fundamental interpretation of the right to bear arms ranges in support for moderate regulation on gun ownership to the abolishment of firearms entirely.^[20] However, framing the dialogue based on the moral standing of gun ownership is intensely polarizing and damaging to efforts to mitigate firearm-related injuries and deaths. Consequently, non-violent gun owners and non-owners remain staunchly divided on the issue of gun ownership at the expense of discussing the greater issue of gun violence.

Surveys show that an overwhelming majority of Americans, including gun owners, support stronger gun safety measures.^{[23],[24]} Colleen Barry, author of survey studies after the deadly shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, has commented:

All too often, pollsters ask Americans whether they support more or less gun control, or frame gun policies as controls on gun ownership generally rather than as measures to keep guns from criminals or other high-risk group. When you drill down to specific policies, you see that Americans are very much in support of common-sense regulations to keep their families and communities safe from gun violence.^[25]

The sentiment for common-sense regulation of firearms was echoed recently by Justice Antonin Scalia, an unwavering proponent of constitutional liberties, when the Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal by gun owners of an Illinois ban on semi-automatic assault rifles and high capacity ammunition magazines.^[26]

Both the ethical debate and broader national dialogue should no longer dwell on the morality of gun ownership, but rather focus on the duties and obligations that come with such liberty. Reframing the conversation in this context can dismiss the polarizing language of “gun control” and motivate common-ground policies on reducing gun violence. Furthermore, reframing the dialogue in this light can change the

perception of gun violence research. Instead of conflating research with advocacy, gun violence research may be viewed as one of the most effective tools for learning how to find the right balance between liberty and safety.

III. The Importance of Research for Protecting the Second Amendment and Public Safety

A compelling example for how gun violence research may protect the Second Amendment while mitigating harm lies in the progress of automobile safety. Guns and motor vehicles are the second and third largest contributors to years of potential life lost, respectively.^[27] In 2015, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, a federal agency devoted to motor vehicle safety, was appropriated \$830 million, which starkly contrasts with the \$5 million to prevent firearm-related injury and death.^[28] The similarity in gun and automobile deaths but disparity in research funding highlights the myopia of the federal ban on gun violence research.

Research to promote automobile safety has shown to be effective at reducing harm without diminishing access to the technology. In the early 1970s, about 25 Americans per 100,000 died in motor vehicle accidents annually. Today the rate is 10, a 60 percent reduction.^[29] Yet over the same time period, US vehicles per capita have increased by over 50 percent.^[30] A wide variety of factors have led to improvements in safety, from safer roadways and automobiles to campaigns to stamp out drunk driving, but these interventions would not have been possible without research to understand the nature and causes of motor vehicle deaths. For instance, early investigations into the benefits of seatbelts encouraged car manufacturers to begin including them in standard models, and eventually compelled governments to mandate seatbelt usage.^[31] The many decades of research, safer technology and laws, and fewer motor vehicle fatalities without a concomitant fall in car ownership offers a lesson. A similar scenario could be envisioned for firearms, where improving safety does not threaten access or ownership.

Jay Dickey, author of the 1996 amendment effectively halting federal gun violence research, has since regretted that such research has not continued and publicly stated that, “If we had somehow gotten the research going, we could have somehow found a solution to the gun violence without there being any restrictions on the Second Amendment ... We could have used that all these years to develop the equivalent of that little small fence”—referring to the highway safety barriers that are credited with saving many lives.^[16] It is not known whether an equivalent technological improvement exists that might reduce gun violence, but the tragedy is that there is no political will to try to find one.

Other firearms research has been shown to increase safety without any attempt to restrict access to guns. In particular, social campaigns that treat gun violence like a disease have proven effective. Dr. Gary Slutkin, a World Health Organization epidemiologist, has noted that the same characteristics observed in a cholera outbreak are seen with gun violence. The single best determinant for whether or not someone will commit a violent act is whether or not they have been exposed to violence before.^[32] Slutkin’s organization, Cure Violence, aims to control gun violence in the same way he would control cholera: blocking person-to-person transmission. His team of “interrupters” uses conflict mediation after a shooting to prevent further violence.^[33] When Cure Violence and other organizations employed these strategies from Baltimore to Chicago and Baghdad to Cape Town, they noticed a significant reduction in violence.^{[34], [35]} Put simply, the intervention works and the spread of gun violence can be addressed like an epidemic. Compellingly for gun owners, the organization never attempts to restrict access to guns or remove guns from the population.

As news of mass shootings continues to occupy the airwaves and Americans continue to perceive a rise in gun crime, the pressure for lawmakers to limit access to firearms will only increase. While this may be an effective solution for reducing violence, any such attempt would meet fierce resistance from gun advocates.

It seems this political impasse can be solved, or at least bypassed, by agreeing to fund federal research on firearm-related injuries and deaths. If gun owners and advocates continue to protest any infringement on the Second Amendment, surely better gun safety research is in their best interest. Otherwise, the political winds may change. Without any knowledge of how to make guns safer, the public and the government may fall back to the conclusion that guns must be banned, and every gun owner's worst fear will be realized. Research on gun violence would be no guarantee for improved safety, but it would be irresponsible not to try.

IV. Taking Action

The lack of funding for gun violence research is beginning to enter the national spotlight. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have stepped up coverage of the issue.^[36]^[37] The Institute of Medicine continues to call for research on gun violence, gun safety technology, and the effects of violence in media.^[38] The message is clear. There are many strategies that reduce the toll that guns have on our society without restricting access. Many more might be discovered if federal research funding is directed toward reducing gun violence. Because gun violence threatens the public's health and welfare, the NIH and CDC are particularly well positioned to research effective interventions. It is time for the federal ban on these two agencies' gun violence research to be lifted.

We urge you to take action and join in this effort by signing a [petition](#) to end the moratorium on gun violence research. As of Thursday, January 28th, just weeks into the New Year, more than 3,600 shootings, 900 deaths, and 1800 injuries from firearms have been reported in the United States.^[39] Let us change this before one of us or our loved ones becomes another victim of this tragic epidemic.

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