

## Point Blank

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It would be hard to deny the appearance of increased gun violence. In following the gun control debate, I've noticed a lot of absolutist views from both sides. Anti-gun advocates make emotional appeals to "protect the children" while ignoring substantial research on gun control. Pro-gun advocates distrust the government and any action it could take. Neither side feels safe enough to meet in the middle to discuss their differences. As a case study in educated discourse, how can we get both sides to feel safe enough to have a rational discussion?

Gun control is a topic that has tickled my mind for a long time. I grew up in the great gun-loving state of Texas, where my classmates were given .22s and taken on hunting trips with their fathers for the 12th birthdays, where guys in my senior class went deer hunting on weekends, where girls wear pink camouflage and learn to handle daddy's pistol, and where a kid shot himself to death in his Algebra class in the classroom above me a decade before Columbine. As someone who grew up in a gun culture, I still feel a deep sense of solidarity with those who defend our "right to bear arms," even though my logical mind knows that what we have today isn't exactly what the founding fathers meant by a "well-armed militia."

I saw a meme that said, "We don't blame cars for drunk drivers, so why would we blame guns for violent people?" This got me thinking. The problem with guns is the ease of access. If someone drives drunk, we take away their license. If someone has violent tendencies, they often retain unfettered access to deadly weapons; taking away their gun license does not restrict their access to firearms — many tragedies have been perpetrated by weapons belonging to other people or obtained illegally. So how do we control access in a logical way?

What would it look like if we regulated guns in a similar fashion to automobiles? See the graphic, right. It seems pretty reasonable; after all, we currently have stricter regulation on the purchase of Sudafed than we do on the purchase of ammunition. Changing gun ownership regulations to require optional safety certification classes and adding mandatory testing and licenses that require renewal, as well as insurance, might ensure greater safety with handguns the same way we ensure safety with automobiles.

Granted, all of that requires a lot more money in order to maintain ownership of a handgun. Some say it's a way to restrict gun ownership to the wealthy; however, if someone can afford \$600 for a handgun, then they can afford \$75 for the test and license plus the annual insurance premiums. These regulations are a lot less expensive than accidentally killing someone, or killing them on purpose in a fit of rage or depression.

This model wouldn't limit what kinds of guns people can have, it just forces them to prove they can be responsible with the weapons they choose. It also holds bearers responsible for the things they do with their weapons the same way we hold people responsible for the things they do with cars, even when it's an "accident."

Granted, this doesn't address the problem of who's responsible when someone else uses your licensed and insured weapon. There should be a provision for the responsibility of keeping your weapons secured; if someone commits a crime with your weapon without your permission, then you may not have had it properly secured and you could be liable for some culpability. It's a deadly weapon; if your kid or friend or brother gets it away from your control, then it wasn't adequately secured.

But... that doesn't address illegal weapons, and I'm not so sure this type of regulation fully addresses the problem anyhow. There's this little thing about supply and demand? We have to address the demand part if we want to have an effect on the supply.

As for how we get extremists to sit down and have a rational conversation about this? I have no idea. The people that want to maintain gun ownership as it is, I'm pretty sure they are actually not out to kill anyone. People get their hackles up when they feel like their rights are being messed with. I think I understand them though, it's the same way I feel when people start trying to legislate a woman's reproductive system. I may not be planning on using it but I'm sure not going to stand still while you're trying to tell me what I should do with it. And the Texas girl in me still thinks, "You can have my gun when you pry it from my cold, dead fingers."

Many who support a ban on guns have either lost someone or sympathize with the tragedy of the senseless violence that has been perpetrated by people with guns. I can certainly identify with that because I've seen my fair share of it. Besides the angry and confused young man from my high school, I've personally experienced someone pointing a gun at me, and it was terrifying; they were out of control and they shouldn't have been able to have access to a gun... but they did...

So how do you have a rational debate when even rational people aren't sure how they feel about it? Certainly, what with a million possible apocalypses, and the very real tragedies that currently proliferate, I sure as heck don't want to be the only one in the melee that brought a steak knife from my kitchen to a gunfight because that was the only weapon that I had. It terrifies me to think that the government would make guns illegal. The government is just not going to get all the guns; there are already millions of illegal weapons, so if all the law-abiding citizens give up their guns, then only the criminals would have guns.

Despite the fact that our country's international stock is plummeting, no other nation would dare invade us because they know Americans are crazy and armed to the teeth. No matter how much of an "idiocracy" the US becomes, at least we're not going to have to fight off any foreign invaders, despite fear-mongering about Al Qaeda, ISIS, or whoever is the bad actor of the week. I'm pretty sure that's one of the reasons why the founding fathers wanted us to have the "well-armed militia" described in the Second Amendment. The other reason is that they wanted to prevent the government from being hijacked into a monarchy/oligarchy. We got one anyhow, it's just that they did it with economics and politics instead of weapons...

There are hundreds of thousands of gun owners who have successfully not killed anyone for the decades that they owned the gun. A large number of people do misuse them, but it's a very small percent, wouldn't

that statistically indicate that gun ownership is not the cause? Maybe if we asked why they did what they did instead of just instantly blame or sentence, we could figure out what's causing this. But blame, especially in the face of tragedy, seems to be more important than logic.

Once again we're back to demand — the “why.” Malcolm Gladwell in his 2015 article in the New Yorker (“Thresholds of Violence: How school shootings catch on”) theorizes that the phenomenon of school shootings may be explained by the theory of mob violence. The social process of a riot is driven by our individual thresholds: the number of people who need to be doing some activity before we agree to join them. Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter described riots as being “started by people with a threshold of zero—instigators willing to throw a rock through a window at the slightest provocation. Then comes the person who will throw a rock if someone else goes first. He has a threshold of one. Next in is the person with the threshold of two. His qualms are overcome when he sees the instigator and the instigator's accomplice. Next to him is someone with a threshold of three, who would never break windows and loot stores unless there were three people right in front of him who were already doing that—and so on up to the hundredth person, a righteous upstanding citizen who nonetheless could set his beliefs aside and grab a camera from the broken window of the electronics store if everyone around him was grabbing cameras from the electronics store.”

This theory could easily be applied to the larger problem of gun violence, as almost a domino effect where each successive event increases the likelihood of the next event by increasing the disinhibition of the potential perpetrator. Gladwell observed, “The problem is not that there is an endless supply of deeply disturbed young men who are willing to contemplate horrific acts. It's worse. It's that young men no longer need to be deeply disturbed to contemplate horrific acts.”

One can simply consider the number of incidents of road rage or bar fights to see how difficult it is for the untrained person to stay calm in a confrontation even when guns are not involved. Add guns to a high-pressure, high-emotion situation and the outcome typically will not be good even if the gun owners know how to use guns properly. How do we stop our citizens from being engulfed in the riot? Outlawing guns is not the answer. Regulating guns is a good step in the right direction, but more is needed, a social balm to quench the fire of discontent. We have lost our social glue, the thing that used to unite us as a society, we are more connected by technology than ever before, yet even more hopelessly disconnected from each other on a fundamental level that winds up making it somehow acceptable to shoot others for very little provocation.

Our current solution to dealing with this violence is to scream and cry on social media about how awful it is, and change our profile picture to some supportive image. We know it's not enough; it seems absurdly trivial in light of tragedy and horror. But I understand why we do it... because we genuinely want to make a difference, to help in some way, even if we aren't sure yet what that is. We want to tell people who we don't even know that we do care. Even though it isn't much, it means something: that we are committed to doing what we can.

We just need to figure out what that is, and soon.

*Photo by Max Kleinen on Unsplash*

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