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Counterpoint: Gun Control Saves Lives

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American Accent

Thesis: Gun control regulation is the best tool we have in the fight to reduce gun violence in the United States.

Summary: The United States has one of the highest rates of gun-related violence in the developed world. Three major factors account for this phenomenon: the tremendous number of guns in circulation; the wide availability of very powerful types of guns expressly designed for killing people; and the lack of comprehensive, uniform gun laws. Although even the strictest gun control lacks the power to prevent all gun violence, increased regulation could significantly reduce both the number and scale of gun-related violent incidents.

The Link Between Guns and Violence

Beginning with the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy and continuing until the present day, Americans have debated, with varying degrees of urgency, the consequences of their constitutionally guaranteed right to bear arms. With legal scholars having reached a consensus that the Second Amendment does, indeed, enshrine an individual's right to own a gun, the debate has shifted direction.

Now, in the aftermath of every mass shooting-and in the United States, they recur with alarming regularity-advocates and opponents of gun control inevitably wonder whether stricter gun control could prevent these types of tragedies.

Both sides are, however, asking the wrong question. The issue is not whether or not stricter gun laws might have kept weapons out of the hands of the shooters at Columbine or Virginia Tech-or out of the hands of victims or witnesses who might have used them to thwart the attacks. The issue is whether or not gun control lowers overall rates of violence. And the answer to this question, based on the experiences of other nations where stricter controls have been put into place, is a resounding yes.

Statistical reality shows us that the incidence of gun violence in a particular country proportionately reflects the stringency of that country's gun laws; England and Japan, which have some of the tightest gun control measures in the world, also feature some of the world's lowest gun homicide rates (per 100,000 people, 0.04 killings and 0.03, respectively). The United States, by contrast, has a rate of 3.42

gun murders per 100,000 people-100 times greater than England or Japan.

Cultural differences alone cannot account for such a dramatic discrepancy. Common sense (and the historical experience of the American western frontier) tells us that the availability of more, and deadlier, guns leads to more shootings. By the same token, if every American citizen walked around with a knife sheathed on his or her belt, there would be more, not fewer, stabbings.

Conversely, limiting the availability and power of guns is likely to lower the number of gun homicides in much the same way that, over time, the wide use of bike helmets has significantly reduced the incidence of head trauma injuries. Even though there will always be riders who do not wear helmets and escape injury and some helmeted ones who do not, they are the exceptions to the rule. Rational policy-whether aimed at bike or gun safety-seeks to drive a trend, not fixate on anomalies.

And the trend is clear. The flood of readily available high-powered weaponry has created a public safety crisis in American society, particularly in cities. Although gun crime declined steadily throughout the 1990s and early 2000s-thanks in part, perhaps, to the assault weapons ban still in force at the time-it increased sharply in 2005 and has been on a steady rise since. In 2008, Mayors Against Illegal Guns, a bipartisan group of 300 US mayors, found that homicides from handguns were highest in states with the most lenient gun laws. The group also found that these states had higher rates of fatal police shootings, and that criminals were gravitating to these states to purchase their weapons.

Shootings of police officers has sponsored a number of changes in the last decade. In 1997, Los Angeles police were authorized to carry assault weapons after a shootout at a bank in which the offender was armed with an AK-47. In September 2007, Miami police chief John Timoney approved a policy allowing officers to carry assault weapons if they wish. Timoney argued this policy was undesirable but necessary, as criminals were increasingly armed with higher-caliber weapons than law enforcement. In 2006, 15 of Miami's 79 gun-related homicides involved assault weapons.

An American Epidemic

The need for gun control as a public safety measure carries particular urgency in the United States, which, according to one 2006 study, is home to more gun-related violence than all but 12 of 112 countries investigated. While no nation or culture is immune to gun violence-or free of individuals inclined to use them to commit mass murder-few Western democracies give their citizens the same degree of access to weapons as presently exists in the US.

Experts estimate that about one-third of all American households contain firearms, and that the total number of guns in circulation is at least 240 million. Approximately one-third of these are handguns, favored for their ease of use and potential for concealment.

In addition to handguns and hunting rifles, semi-automatic weapons-such as the 9mm semi-automatic Glock pistol used by the shooter in the April 2007 Virginia Tech killings-also make up a significant proportion of America's privately-owned arsenal. While legal ownership of rapid-fire weapons such as the Glock is restricted, law enforcement and military personnel in other developed nations can access this type of weapon via legal, over-the-counter purchase at gun shops and gun shows throughout the country.

Each year in the US around 30,000 people die from gunfire. Around half of these are murders, a little less than half are suicide, and the rest are lethal accidents. Of the annual 30,000 death toll, several hundred of the victims are children.

In less than a decade, Americans have mourned the murders of twelve high school students and a teacher at Columbine, Colorado (1999), five Amish schoolchildren at Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania (2006), and thirty-two college students and faculty at Virginia Tech (2007).

Of the fourteen worst shooting massacres that have occurred over the past half century in all nations of the developed world, fully half of them have taken place in the US-which is also the only nation in which subsequent incidents have actually claimed more victims than those that preceded them.

To stem the gun violence, Americans need to implement an increased scrutiny of gun sales and revisit the question of whether the right to bear arms can responsibly include the right to bear some of the types of guns presently available for legal ownership.

Weighing the Public Interest

Contrary to the dire predictions of many gun lobby activists, it is possible-and incumbent-to implement gun control measures that serve the greater public good while respecting the rights of law-abiding citizens to own and use guns. Hunters, sportsmen, and individuals who believe that guns can provide them with a means of self-defense would retain their Second Amendment rights even after the passage of gun control laws.

Such reforms would include a renewal of the 1994 assault weapons ban, as well as a rewriting of the ban's loopholes; no longer would gun manufacturers be able to comply with the letter of the law by making merely cosmetic changes to their weapons that do not diminish their deadly capacity. A stringent system of gun registration for weapons and their owners, similar to the systems in place to register motor vehicles and license drivers, would also pose no threat to law-abiding gun owners.

Similarly, a rethinking of the criteria presently used to deem someone mentally unfit to purchase a firearm would prevent at least some dangerous people from getting their hands on the powerful weapons that the Virginia Tech shooter was so easily able to purchase, despite his earlier voluntary stay in a mental health facility. The current standard, which prohibits the sale of a gun to anyone who "has been adjudicated as a mental defective or has been committed to any mental institution," dates to an era when involuntary commitment of the mentally ill was the norm.

No One Needs an AK-47 to Kill a Deer

All freedoms, even those guaranteed by the US Constitution, are subject to reasonable limits, as the rulings of the United States Supreme Court have shown time and again. The freedom of expression, for example, does not translate into an unfettered right to scrawl graffiti on public buildings or, without actual cause, to scream "Fire!" in a crowded theater. The exercise of such speech would infringe on the rights of others and is therefore susceptible to regulation.

Likewise, the right to bear arms should not be interpreted to mean that the average civilian must be guaranteed access to weapons designed for the purpose of killing as many people as possible as efficiently as possible. The state has a legitimate, compelling interest in restricting such weaponry to military and law enforcement personnel. Deer hunters, pistol range enthusiasts, and homeowners can fully meet their weapons needs without recourse to the types of guns favored in war zones.

Such rational interpretations of the Second Amendment already exist, in fact. Few Americans would argue, for example, that their constitutionally-guaranteed right to bear arms translates into a right to carry a machete blade in a shopping mall or to sport a shoulder-fired missile apparatus in the vicinity of an airport.

Conclusion

The 30,000 gun-related deaths that occur each year in the United States provide evidence both of a serious and growing threat to public safety, as well as of the need for practical gun control measures to address that threat. The experiences of other nations, where the rights of individual gun owners have been more judiciously balanced against the greater public interest, offer models for how the United States can lower its unacceptable rates of gun-related violence.

Ponder This

1. What is the author's thesis (main argument) about gun control?
- 2. Which of the author's arguments do you find most convincing? Why?
- 3. The author uses a number of analogies (comparisons) with issues similar to, but separate from gun control. In your opinion, is this an effective strategy? Why or why not?
- 4. Gun control is a contentious issue that raises conflicting, passionate opinions. Choose one of the author's arguments and explain how an opponent of gun control might counter it.

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By Beverly Ballaro

Co-Author: Laura Finley

Laura Finley earned her PhD in Sociology from Western Michigan University in 2002. Since then, she has taught sociology, criminology, women's studies, and education at several colleges and universities in Michigan, Colorado, and Florida. She is currently Assistant Professor of Sociology and Criminology at Barry University. Dr. Finley is author or co-author of seven books and has two in progress. She has also

authored numerous journal articles and book chapters on topics related to criminology and peace education. In addition, she has provided training as well as directed social change and prevention programs for a domestic violence agency in Florida. In 2008, Dr. Finley started the Center for Living and Teaching Peace, which provides training, education, curricula, and events related to peace and social justice.

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