



Gun Science

How data can help clarify the gun-control debate

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 31,672 people died by guns in 2010 (the most recent year for which U.S. figures are available), a staggering number that is orders of magnitude higher than that of comparable Western democracies. What can we do about it? National Rifle Association executive vice president Wayne LaPierre believes he knows: “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” If LaPierre means professionally trained police and military who routinely practice shooting at ranges, this observation would at least be partially true. If he means armed private citizens with little to no training, he could not be more wrong.

Consider a 1998 study in the *Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery* that found that “every time a gun in the home was used in a self-defense or legally justifiable shooting, there were four unintentional shootings, seven criminal assaults or homicides, and 11 attempted or completed suicides.” Pistol owners’ fantasy of blowing away home-invading bad guys or street toughs holding up liquor stores is a myth debunked by the data showing that a gun is 22 times more likely to be used in a criminal assault, an accidental death or injury, a suicide attempt or a homicide than it is for self-defense. I harbored this belief for the 20 years I owned a Ruger .357 Magnum with hollow-point bullets designed to shred the body of anyone who dared to break into my home, but when I learned about these statistics, I got rid of the gun.

More insights can be found in a 2013 book from Johns Hopkins University Press entitled *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis*, edited by Daniel W. Webster and Jon S. Vernick, both professors in health policy and management at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. In addition to the 31,672 people killed by guns in 2010, another 73,505 were treated in hospital emergency rooms for nonfatal bullet wounds, and 337,960 nonfatal violent crimes were committed with guns. Of those 31,672 dead, 61 percent were suicides, and the vast majority of the rest were homicides by people who knew one another.

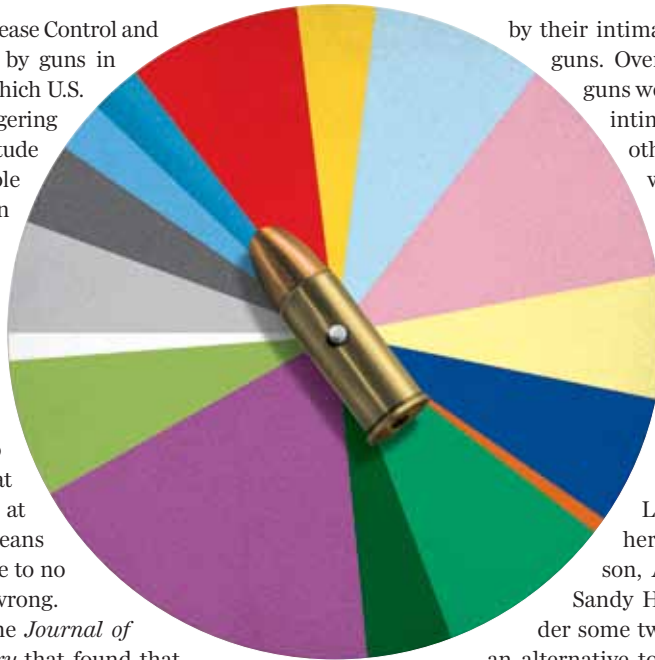
For example, of the 1,082 women and 267 men killed in 2010

by their intimate partners, 54 percent were by guns. Over the past quarter of a century, guns were involved in greater number of intimate partner homicides than all other causes combined. When a woman is murdered, it is most likely by her intimate partner with a gun. Regardless of what really caused Olympic track star Oscar Pistorius to shoot his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp (whether he mistook her for an intruder or he snapped in a lover’s quarrel), her death is only the latest such headline. Recall, too, the fate of Nancy Lanza, killed by her own gun in her own home in Connecticut by her son, Adam Lanza, before he went to Sandy Hook Elementary School to murder some two dozen children and adults. As an alternative to arming women against violent

men, legislation can help: data show that in states that prohibit gun ownership by men who have received a domestic violence restraining order, gun-caused homicides of intimate female partners were reduced by 25 percent.

Another myth to fall to the facts is that gun-control laws disarm good people and leave the crooks with weapons. Not so, say the Johns Hopkins authors: “Strong regulation and oversight of licensed gun dealers—defined as having a state law that required state or local licensing of retail firearm sellers, mandatory record keeping by those sellers, law enforcement access to records for inspection, regular inspections of gun dealers, and mandated reporting of theft or loss of firearms—was associated with 64 percent less diversion of guns to criminals by in-state gun dealers.”

Finally, before we concede civilization and arm everyone to the teeth pace the NRA, consider the primary cause of the centuries-long decline of violence as documented by Steven Pinker in his 2011 book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*: the rule of law by states that turned over settlement of disputes to judicial courts and curtailed private self-help justice through legitimate use of force by police and military trained in the proper use of weapons. ■



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