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Reducing Gun Violence in America

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Preface

One month—to the hour—after the harrowing and unfathomable massacre of 20 children and 6 adults in a Newtown, Connecticut, elementary school, Johns Hopkins University convened a summit that brought together preeminent researchers on gun violence from across the country and around the world. This was a moment when advocates, lobbyists, and politicians on both sides of the gun-control debate were beginning to mobilize and spar. In this unruly mix, Johns Hopkins seized the opportunity to discharge a critical role of research universities and provided principled scaffolding for the debate. We wanted to use the opportunity to cut through the din of the shrill and the incendiary, the rancorous and the baseless, and provide rigorous, research-based considerations of the most effective gun regulations and the appropriate balance between individual rights and civic obligation.

At Johns Hopkins, our scholars and researchers have been investigating the public health effects of gun violence for well over two decades. For the past seventeen years, the Center for Gun Policy and Research has provided a home for that study, producing nationally recognized research and recommendations aimed at understanding and curtailing the impact of gun violence.

Given the national historical backdrop of a bleak record of stunted policy reform in this area, some may have considered this summit to be another exercise in futility. The skeptic's fear is that good ideas for gun-policy reform are no match for the formidable interests that oppose gun control legislation—even after an event as cataclysmic as Newtown.

But our decidedly more optimistic view is predicated on the belief that this country is not slavishly tethered to the current matrix of inadequate national gun laws. Rather, despite a long history of failed legislative and policy reform and of opportunities inexplicably squandered, progress is possible. This view is illustrated both by the experiences of other countries and those of the United States.

At the summit, speakers from Australia, Scotland, and Brazil discussed the adoption of significant new policies in the wake of horrific moments of gun violence. These nations have never had constitutional guarantees protecting individuals' rights to bear arms, their political institutions vary greatly from those in the United States, and "gun culture" is an alien concept. But there are telling lessons to be gleaned from the approaches these countries took to address the wanton loss of life from gun violence.

In the United States, there is no denying the sea change in public sentiment that has buttressed public health reforms in areas as diverse as seat belt usage, drunk driving, and lead exposure. From the passage of civil rights legislation to the regulation of tobacco products, we have observed enough nontrivial policy change in recent decades to recognize that the apparent iron grip of status quo forces can be shattered and our policy can progress.

We owe great appreciation to Daniel Webster and Jon Vernick, of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, who framed the questions at the heart of this issue, organized the summit, and edited this book, all with extraordinary sophistication and speed. They were supported by a team of committed Johns Hopkins staff who set aside daily obligations to support this urgent cause. To each of them, and to the Johns Hopkins University Press, which published this book in unprecedented time, we are grateful.

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