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Reducing Gun Violence in America

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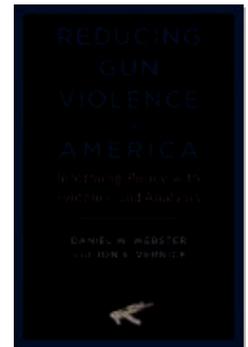
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Introduction

The role of guns in violence, and what should be done, are subjects of intense debate in the United States and elsewhere. But certain facts are not debatable. More than 31,000 people died from gunshot wounds in the United States in 2010.¹ Because the victims are disproportionately young, gun violence is one of the leading causes of premature mortality in the United States. In addition to these deaths, in 2010, there were an estimated 337,960 nonfatal violent crimes committed with guns,² and 73,505 persons were treated in hospital emergency departments for nonfatal gunshot wounds.^{3,4} The social and economic costs of gun violence in America are also enormous.

Despite the huge daily impact of gun violence, most public discourse on gun policy is centered on mass shootings in public places. Such incidents are typically portrayed as random acts by severely mentally ill individuals which are impossible to predict or prevent. Those who viewed, heard, or read news stories on gun policy might conclude the following: (1) mass shootings, the mentally ill, and assault weapons are the primary concerns; (2) gun control laws disarm law-abiding citizens without affecting criminals' access to guns;

(3) there is no evidence that gun control laws work; and (4) the public has no appetite for strengthening current gun laws. Yet all of the evidence in this book counters each of these misperceptions with facts to the contrary.

As Miller et al. point out in their essay, gun availability greatly increases the risk of violent death in America because many acts of gun violence involve spontaneous altercations that result in death or serious injury when a gun is readily available. Vitte et al. explain in their call for expanding disqualifying conditions for having handguns that this is especially true when these conflicts involve individuals with criminal histories, perpetrators of domestic violence, substance abusers, and youth.

Cook and Ludwig's essay reveals disappointing but not surprising findings of their evaluation of the Brady Law given that it leaves a substantial gap in federal gun control laws by omitting private transactions from background check and record keeping requirements. Papers by Webster et al. and Wintemute provide evidence that state laws that fill this gap by requiring universal background checks reduce diversions of guns to criminals.

Addressing gaps in the background check system are important because prohibiting firearm purchase and possession by high-risk groups appears to decrease violence. Swanson et al. document beneficial effects from prohibiting firearms for individuals with certain mental illnesses as long as appropriate records are shared with law enforcement agencies that screen gun buyers. Zeoli and Frattaroli share evidence that some firearm prohibitions for domestic violence offenders are saving lives, and Wintemute provides evidence that preventing violent misdemeanants from purchasing handguns reduces violence.

Some elected officials claim that they are looking out for gun owners when they pass measures deceptively named "Firearm Owners' Protection Act" or "Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act." But essays by Vernick and Webster and by Braga and Gagliardi demonstrate that these laws and others like them are designed solely to protect gun sellers against measures that would otherwise hold them accountable for practices that divert guns to criminals. Current federal laws make it very difficult to prosecute, sue, revoke the licenses of rogue gun dealers, or even share data about which gun manufacturers and retailers are connected to unusually large numbers of guns used by criminals. Studies have shown that when gun dealers experience greater regulation and oversight by law enforcement and are vulnerable to lawsuits

for illegal sales practices, far fewer of the guns they sell end up in the hands of criminals.

Koper reviews his evaluation of the 1994 federal ban on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines. That ban was designed to remove military-style weapons and make it harder for multiple rounds to be fired without reloading. Unfortunately, the assault weapon ban was easy to evade and millions of existing high-capacity ammunition magazines were grandfathered. The law was allowed to expire in 2004, but Koper's findings can teach us how to improve such laws in the future.

Firearms themselves can also be made safer. Teret and Mernit describe the benefits of safe gun designs, particularly personalized guns designed to be operable only by an authorized user. They discuss the history of these technologies, their present-day feasibility, and ways to promote their adoption.

The United States is not the only nation to have suffered from mass shootings or to address an endemic gun violence problem. Mass shootings in Dunblane, Scotland, and Port Arthur, Tasmania, led to major changes in the gun laws of the United Kingdom and Australia. Essays by North, Peters, and Alpers describe these new laws. Brazil had some of the highest rates of gun violence in the world. Yet here, too, comprehensive changes to gun laws were associated with reductions in rates of violence. Bandeira discusses this success story. Although bans on certain handguns (as in the UK) or bans and mass buy-backs of specific long guns (in Australia) are unlikely to occur in the United States, the authors discuss the lessons U.S. advocates and policymakers can learn from these successes in other nations.

For many years, some groups have claimed that the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution stands as an obstacle to most gun laws. Rosenthal and Winkler debunk this myth with careful legal analysis of recent U.S. Supreme Court and lower court opinions. The recommendations provided in this book should withstand constitutional scrutiny.

Public opinion is also an important determinant of whether any particular evidence-based policy becomes law. McGinty et al. report on a newly conducted national public opinion poll of 33 different policies. Most were supported by strong majorities of the public, including a majority of gun owners.

The book concludes with consensus recommendations from the book's contributors. These recommendations address the full range of topics covered in this book. If implemented, these recommendations have the potential to

dramatically reduce the number of gun deaths in the United States, enhancing the quality of life for all Americans.

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NOTES

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) [Online]. National Center for Injury Control and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (producer). Available from: URL: <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/index.html>. [2012, Mar. 15].
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4. Vyrostek SB, Annett JL, Ryan GW. Surveillance for Fatal and Non-Fatal Injuries—United States, 2001. *MMWR*. 2004; 53(SS07):1–57.