

ModernHealthcare

Could funding gun violence research help reduce mass shootings?

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The deadliest mass shooting in recent U.S. history evoked an immediate call for swift government action to address gun violence.

Democratic senators responded with a 14-hour filibuster over bills that would keep guns out of the hands of those on the government's terrorist watch list and expand background checks to gun shows and online gun sales.

Those responses are typical following mass shootings such as the one June 12 in Orlando, Fla., that killed 50 people, including the gunman. But they haven't led to actual policy change. Experts say that's because one thing is missing: science.

Lost in the emotional debate about public safety and Second Amendment rights is evidence-based data to inform policy.

The American Medical Association, the nation's largest doctors society, this week acknowledged gun violence as a public health issue and pledged it would lobby Congress to lift a 20-year ban on federally funded research on gun violence.

Republicans quickly rejected the idea, including those in the GOP Doctors Caucus who are themselves AMA members. Rep. Tom Cole of Oklahoma, who chairs the House Appropriations Committee's Health Subcommittee, told The Hill, a political news website, he didn't particularly see the need.

“We're really stuck,” said Dr. Mark Rosenberg, former director of the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “When science stopped in this area, things came to a standstill.”

Rosenberg oversaw gun violence research at the CDC until 1996, when Congress decreased the center's budget by \$2.6 million—the exact amount allocated to conduct gun violence prevention research.

The same year Congress passed a bill lobbied for by the National Rifle Association that prevented the CDC from funding research intended to “advocate or promote gun control.”

Though the moves did not explicitly ban federally funded research on gun violence, Rosenberg said their intent was quite clear.

“These were really shots across the bow,” Rosenberg said. “It gave a warning to people at CDC and at HHS and to extramural researchers that if they did research on gun violence prevention, Congress would have the right to question them, and they would be able to say what they're really doing is advocating or promoting gun control.”

Ultimately, the CDC bowed to the pressure, according to Rosenberg, who said the agency over time decreased research funding.

CDC spokeswoman Courtney Lenard said the agency “has very limited discretionary funding to dedicate to firearm violence research and prevention.”

Congress would have to appropriate the \$10 million allotted for gun research that President Barack Obama requested in his fiscal 2017 budget for the agency to again examine the causes and prevention of gun violence, Lenard said. Republicans in Congress have blocked that funding.

“Our politics have conspired to make it as easy as possible for a terrorist or even just a disturbed individual to buy extraordinarily powerful weapons, and they can do so legally,” Obama said while visiting the families of those killed in Orlando.

While it's unknown which policies might stop people wanting to do harm, it's clear that mass shootings are becoming more prevalent.

There have been more than 1,000 incidents since 26 students and school staff were killed in Newtown, Conn., in 2012. As of June 16, there have been 182 mass shootings this year ([See this week's Data Points](#)).

The overall death rate from firearms actually declined by 31% from 1993 to 2014, according to the Pew Research Center, but there has been a 6.1% uptick in deaths from 2010 to 2014.

Dr. Andrew Gurman, the AMA's newly elected president, said it's an epidemic that needs to be addressed as a public health issue.

“This is not a discussion about Second Amendment rights. This is not a discussion about gun ownership,” Gurman said. “This is a discussion about our total unwillingness to study a problem that causes 30,000 deaths in this country every year.”

Public health policy experts are optimistic the AMA's new policy will move the conversation on gun violence research forward.

“I think they bring an enormous amount of clout into the debate,” said Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director for the American Public Health Association.

Gun-rights advocates criticized the AMA's position, claiming the group had been swayed by a

“political agenda” rather than facts.

“As doctors are the most revered of scientists in the United States, it is disappointing to see them fall victim to the emotional political agenda of the gun control crowd,” said NRA spokesman Lars Dalseide. “Attacks in Paris, Brussels and San Bernardino illustrate that gun control will do nothing to stop a determined terrorist from attacking the innocent.”

The validity of the little research that has been conducted in recent years has also been mired in politics.

The NRA claims academic reports show the 1994 assault weapons ban didn't lower crime, while Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who sponsored a bill to institute a new ban on assault weapons, asserts the earlier ban did reduce crime.

But a study funded by the U.S. Justice Department concluded that it was too early to credit the 1994 ban with any of the nation's drop in gun violence. The law grandfathered in millions of previously purchased assault weapons, and the authors said the effects of the law were occurring gradually and were “still unfolding” when the ban expired in 2004.

Adam Bates, policy analyst for the libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, believes any research paid for by any government entity is going to raise eyebrows and perhaps not lead to any significant policy.

“I think the concerns about this have to do with things like trust deficits with the government and whether this research should be conducted by the government or if it should be privately funded,” he said.