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‘Common-sense’ gun reform is overrated. Here’s why.

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One of the recent refrains from the White House and other political circles after a gun tragedy is, “We need common-sense gun reforms.” It’s a convenient piece of jargon that conveys level-headedness, non-partisanship and empathy. But it doesn’t mean anything substantive, because not all gun deaths are the same: Treating them as if they are is neither common sense nor good public policy. Many of these “common-sense reforms” — assault weapon bans and vague allusions to “gun availability” — do little to reduce the major drivers of gun-related deaths.

The United States contains an estimated 270 million to 310 million firearms. All gun crimes and gun deaths are overwhelmingly perpetrated with handguns, yet barely one quarter of Americans favor a handgun ban that would be required to lower that number significantly. So-called “assault weapons” and “high-capacity” magazines are easy political targets because they sound scary to people unfamiliar with firearms. However, restricting either or both would likely have no measurable effect on gun crime rates.

Roughly two-thirds of American gun deaths are suicides, and these comprise approximately half of all American suicides. Clearly, firearms increase the likelihood of a successful suicide attempt. And there is evidence from other countries suggesting that decreasing access to firearms can lower overall suicide rates.

But that doesn’t mean we need new laws to limit firearm ownership. In an interview with ProPublica, Jeffrey Swanson of Duke University School of Medicine suggested that mental health professionals “can do a lot without invoking law, by talking to people about harm reduction and locking up guns.” Other programs such as voluntary buybacks may reduce the number of household firearms.

But neither suicides nor gun deaths are “epidemics” in any real sense of the term. Overstating their frequency with inflated rhetoric creates an impetus for government action to do *something* — even if that something is not effective at addressing the problem it’s meant to solve.

Of the remaining third of gun deaths, the majority are, in fact, homicides. These have two primary drivers: inner-city violence — that is, drug, gang and other violence attendant to poverty and segregation — and domestic violence. Although spree killings like San Bernardino make headlines for days at a time, they are statistical outliers, making up a small fraction of gun deaths every year.

Inner-city violence has a lot of causes, but two government-driven public policy problems stand out.

First, America's war on drugs has been an abysmal failure, one that has bred violence through the black markets that prohibition creates. Despite whites and blacks using drugs at roughly the same rates, America's focus on drug enforcement in the inner cities helps drive the violence among distributors in these segregated areas.

Second, firearm homicide clearance rates — that is, police apprehending a suspect and charging him for the killing — are embarrassingly low in minority neighborhoods. In her book, "Ghettoside," Los Angeles Times journalist Jill Leovy argues that an absence of trust between police and black communities, along with a lack of adequate police resources aimed at solving homicides in black neighborhoods, combine to cheapen black life by allowing black murder to go virtually unpunished. If there is a gun violence "epidemic" anywhere in America, it is in the impoverished black neighborhoods of Los Angeles, Baltimore and similar enclaves.

Until the Supreme Court decisions in *D.C. v. Heller* and *McDonald v. Chicago* that recognized the individual right to bear arms, several U.S. cities had virtually banned guns. In spite of its ban, Washington, D.C., was the "murder capital" of the country eight times between 1985 and 1999. After Chicago's gun ban in 1982, its murder rate increased at more than twice the national average. More than three decades of high murder rates show that restricting legal access to guns was not the answer to gun violence problems and that making legal firearm acquisition harder is unlikely to meaningfully impact violence in America's inner cities. Ending the drug war and providing more educational and economic opportunity for America's racially ghettoized poor would improve public safety much more effectively than new feckless gun restrictions.

Finally, domestic violence is a genuine problem, but one not getting enough attention on either side of the gun debate. More than 90 percent of female murder victims know their killers, many of whom are domestic abusers or jealous lovers. If implemented correctly, a judicial process that takes and keeps firearms away from those who have shown a propensity for assault — those with violent crime convictions, pending domestic abuse or stalking charges or active restraining orders — could reduce the frequency of gun-related domestic violence.

There is good news. Murder and gun crime rates in America have been trending downward since the 1990s. An American who isn't at risk for suicide, in an abusive relationship or in a neighborhood beset by the drug war is extremely unlikely to die by firearm. As tragic, frightening and media-saturating as mass shootings are, they are rare. For the most part, America is a very safe place to live.

After a tragedy, trotting out clichés and focusing on exotic firearm terminology may be very effective at rousing emotions, but it doesn't make sound public policy. That's because public policy is not just about identifying "common-sense" solutions put forth in a climate of fear and outrage — it's about looking at the data and recognizing the political and legal landscape in which that data exist.

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