

Column: A focus on cosmetics won't stop gun deaths

Jonathan Blanks

March 31, 2019

Within a week of the horrifying massacre of 50 people at mosques in New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced a national ban on “military-style semi-automatics” and “assault rifles” that would include a mandatory buyback for current owners of those weapons. American gun control advocates and Democratic politicians praised the move, denouncing the presence of “weapons of war” in civilian hands.

Reasonable people can disagree whether or not semiautomatic rifles such as the AR-15 should be banned or restricted; some farmers may use them to keep predators away from livestock, though it's also true that they are simply fun to shoot. But “military-style” is a cosmetic description with no real meaning.

This distinction isn't just semantic “gunsplaining.” Instead, this rhetoric is a kind of fearmongering that takes attention away from the policies that would be most effective at preventing gun deaths.

Some basic knowledge is necessary to craft sound policy. The AR-15 is a semiautomatic rifle, meaning most simply that one trigger pull results in one bullet fired and also sets the gun up to fire the next round. (Many handguns are also semiautomatic.) A rifle used in the military, such as the M4 carbine, has a fully automatic function, meaning that one trigger pull will release successive rounds until the shooter releases the trigger or the magazine is emptied.

The AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle (“AR” is the branding for Armalite, the original manufacturer, but the rifle and its interchangeable parts are now made by many companies) is among the most popular rifles owned privately in the United States. Automatic rifles are considered machine guns under the National Firearms Act. While such firearms made before 1986 technically are not banned, they are rare outside of specialty gun ranges, Hollywood studios and high-end collections because they are strictly regulated and prohibitively expensive.

Unfortunately, gun-control advocates have used the appearance of semiautomatic rifles, which some people find menacing, to exaggerate the dangers the general public faces from their existence. Far more important than the cosmetic similarities and technical differences among firearms are which weapons actually are used in the majority of gun deaths and victimizations.

About two-thirds of gun deaths every year in the United States are suicides, making up about half of all U.S. suicides. A relatively small number of people are killed in accidents, but the bulk of the remaining homicides stem from urban street-level shootings and domestic violence. The overwhelming majority of all these deaths — suicides, accidents and homicides — are perpetrated with handguns. Mass shootings, while they may grab headlines for days or weeks at a time, make up a small fraction of gun deaths every year. Even in those high-profile tragedies, however, handguns are far more common than semiautomatic rifles.

These statistics might encourage politicians to focus on smarter urban policies, suicide prevention and better ways to keep firearms out of the hands of abusers to further the downward trend of gun deaths. But instead, the politics of fear — particularly around the rare but high-profile mass shootings — drives much of the gun debate. A comprehensive ban on semiautomatic weapons — rifles and handguns — is far beyond what most gun-control advocates are proposing, in part because it is a political non-starter that would not pass constitutional muster in the United States. The ban New Zealand's Ardern has proposed wouldn't limit semiautomatic handguns, either.

Indeed, the fear-driven policymaking has spilled over into school safety. Many schools use armed school resource officers, often on-duty police officers assigned to the schools. These officers make student arrest more likely and sometimes result in violent takedowns of students. Lockdowns and active-shooter drills have led to officers firing blank rounds to simulate live fire, mock executions of teachers, and students tearfully writing out wills while hunkered down. There's little evidence police officers or active-shooter drills make schools any safer, but there is growing evidence that they traumatize the very children the schools are trying to protect.

Despite the horrific tragedies at schools in Newtown, Conn., and Parkland, Fla., schools are among the safest places for a child to be. Last year, The Washington Post reported an estimate that the odds of a child being fatally shot while at school any given day since 1999 was 1 in 614,000,000. Statistically speaking, a child is in more danger riding in a car than attending school, but we don't subject students to staged traffic collisions in a misguided effort to protect them.

To be fair to gun-control advocates, the catastrophe of mass shootings and our vulnerability to them can be awful to contemplate. Fear is a powerful motivator, but right now it is steering policy in unhelpful and even harmful directions. The United States can get better at reducing gun deaths and gun victimizations. Our violent crime rates have been trending downward for two decades. But we need policies that address the far more common underlying problems that lead people to harm themselves and others.

Jonathan Blanks is a research associate in the Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice.