

## Want to stop gun deaths? Stop talking about 'weapons of war'

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March 29, 2019

Within one week of the horrifying massacre of 50 people at mosques in Christchurch, 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 semi-automatic rifles such as the AR-15 should be banned or restricted. But “military-style” is a cosmetic description with no real meaning. 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 semi-automatic rifle, meaning that one trigger pull results in one bullet being fired and also sets the gun up to fire the next round. (Many handguns are also semi-automatic.) The AR-15-style semi-automatic rifle is among the most popular rifles owned privately in the U.S.

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. Fully automatic rifles are considered machine guns under the National Firearms Act. While such firearms made before 1986 are not technically banned, they are rare because they are strictly regulated and prohibitively expensive.

Unfortunately, gun control advocates have used the appearance of semi-automatic rifles 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.

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 gun accidents, but most 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 make up a small fraction of gun deaths every year. Even in those high-profile tragedies, however, handguns are far more commonly used than semi-automatic 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 semi-

automatic weapons is far beyond what most gun control advocates are proposing, in part because it is a political nonstarter that would not pass constitutional muster in the U.S.

And despite the horrific tragedies at schools in Newtown, Connecticut, and Parkland, Florida, 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.

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.

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