



Medium

Gun Policy in Black and White

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Last week, after the national March for Our Lives events, black students from the Parkland, Florida high school that suffered the spree killing in March held a press conference draw attention to the unbalanced coverage their affluent, predominantly white classmates have received in the wake of the tragedy. Although they supported their classmates' efforts, the black students correctly noted that the calls to end gun violence by Black Lives Matter and similar organizations have not received similar support and sympathy nationwide. To his credit, David Hogg has repeatedly used his time in the media spotlight to discuss the racial and socioeconomic privilege that has helped propel him and his classmates to the center of the national gun debate. But simply acknowledging that disparity does not overcome the number of differences between how white and black communities typically experience gun violence. This incongruity isn't the students' fault, of course. The problems are much older than they are.

Before we even consider race, proponents of gun control often treat all gun deaths as the same. At first blush, focusing on the common denominator—firearms—makes intuitive sense. But digging deeper into the other causes of gun deaths, and the political reality of a country with hundreds of millions of guns, leads to different solutions for the very different underlying problems.

In the United States, roughly two-thirds of gun deaths every year are suicides, and those comprise about half of all American suicides. Thus, magazine limits or assault weapons bans like those proposed in the wake of the Florida massacre will make no impact whatever on this largest cause of gun deaths each year. These tens of thousands of deaths are effectively ignored in the gun debate because the singular focus on guns overshadows the factors drive so many Americans to kill themselves each year, with or without firearms.

But the remaining third of American gun deaths aren't all the same either. Most of them are homicides stemming from either street violence or domestic abuse. Mass shootings, the recent catalyst for gun control debates in popular media, make up a very small fraction of gun deaths each year. But because they are so random and often take the lives of middle-class white people, the political reaction to spree killings far surpasses (and thus overstates) the danger most Americans face from such random and terrible violence. For affluent whites, America is a pretty safe place to live.

In American cities such as Baltimore and Chicago, particularly their segregated and economically depressed black neighborhoods, gun violence is far more prevalent. Local students, activists, and other community members have continuously pled for greater safety and security from the violence, but the surviving residents of these areas don't get usually get panels on the Sunday morning talk shows. If anything, their plights are used by conservative pundits to belittle "black pathology" and divert attention from the abusive policing that too often ends with more young black bodies dead in the streets.

Yet, what is one of the alternatives to gun control being put forth to protect schools from mass shootings? More school resource officers (SROs). SROs are often sworn police officers with full arrest power who patrol many middle and high school campuses nationwide. A 2011 Justice Policy Institute study showed that SROs tend to feed the school-to-prison pipeline without measurably improving school safety and may, at times, actually contribute to disorder. Other studies have reported similar results. Among other problems, administrative and discipline issues too often become criminal cases if an SRO gets involved.

The black students in Parkland have complained that their school is now a "police state" and that students of color are racially profiled by the police there. Other incidents between SROs and black students around the country support the wariness students of color may feel toward heightened police presence.

Although limited to schools, SROs typify a broader fundamental problem with typical solutions to gun violence: the government reflexively turns to the criminal law and justice system. Specifically, policies shift to harass presumptively innocent individuals—typically young black and brown men—through policies like Stop-and-Frisk and then, if caught, laws punish offenders with disproportionate sentences as if they committed a violent crime for simple gun possession. U.S. Department of Justice policy, for example, instructs U.S. Attorneys to charge the maximum allowed under law for any given defendant. For drug offenders, the rule thus requires a charge that carries additional mandatory minimum five years' imprisonment if the offender possesses a firearm, whether or not the offender used the gun in furtherance of the offense. Another federal law provides up to a 10-year sentence if a gun owner is found to use or be addicted to illicit drugs. (*N.B.*: federal law does not recognize state-legal medical marijuana use.) State laws vary, but illegal gun possession is often charged as a felony.

While illegal gun possession should be discouraged, the lengthy sentences and life-long collateral consequences of felony convictions only add to the nation's mass incarceration problem. Violent gun crimes should be prosecuted, but gun possession is not an inherently violent act and defendants should not be charged and sentenced as though it is.

In this latest push for more government action to reduce gun violence, activists ought to be careful what they wish for. Simply adding more police and punitively enforcing more gun laws are unlikely to make anyone any safer, and mounds of evidence show the harsh, unintended consequences of any new policy will almost certainly fall on minorities.

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