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While Trump targets immigrants and refugees, Americans keep killing Americans

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Violent crime in the U.S. has been in steady decline for the last quarter-century, but it's only by a perverse comparison with an even bloodier past that nearly 16,000 annual homicides — 11,000 of them committed with firearms — can be considered an improvement. Matched against other developed nations, we are by far the most violent and have by far the most firearms.

But instead of looking inward and trying to come to terms — psychologically, politically, legally — with our own violent culture, Americans seem to spend an inordinate amount of time blaming outsiders for what we're doing to ourselves. In recent years, politicians and activists have made headlines and won votes by stoking fears of immigrants and refugees who, they argue, need to be kept out of the country in order to protect Americans from terrorism.

The truth, however, is that the vast majority of the violence in this country isn't terrorism, isn't perpetrated by foreigners and is not the result of "mass killings" (defined as incidents in which four or more people are killed). Rather, homicides happen in ones and twos and threes, often at home (about 43% of homicides are committed by acquaintances or relatives of the victim) and are not usually driven by a political or religious agenda, but by anger or revenge, or in the commission of another crime. The presence of a gun makes it five times more likely that a domestic violence incident will turn deadly.

Ready access to deadly weapons too easily turns a flash of anger, or a flash of fear, into a fatal encounter. That's why stronger laws that put reasonable limits on the ability to obtain lethal weapons are necessary. We must not jeopardize our national safety to assuage the National Rifle Assn. or the gun manufacturers lobby.

The nature of our everyday violence puts the Trump administration's obsessive targeting of immigrants and refugees — whom the president insists on portraying as threats to national security — in a curious light. Terrorism is real, and we don't discount it as a threat, but one's chance of being killed by someone other than a foreign-born terrorist is 253 times more than by a foreign-born terrorist, according to the Cato Institute. Studies also find that immigrants commit violent crimes at lower rates than native-born Americans.

The problems that led to the carnage in Las Vegas lie within. If President Trump was sincerely concerned about making Americans safer, he'd attack the clear and present danger — our own violent culture and our easy access to firearms — and put his anti-immigrant dog whistle in a drawer.