



The Raw Data

Unspun and unbiased. These are the facts.

Dick's Sporting Goods announces end to 'assault-style rifles' sales, any firearm sales to those under 21

On Wednesday, Dick's Sporting Goods, Inc., released a statement saying it was ending sales of all assault-style rifles and prohibiting the sale of firearms to people under 21. CEO Edward Stack said, "we're taking these guns out of all our stores permanently." The decision came after the Feb. 14 high school shooting in Parkland, Florida, in which the shooter used an AR-15 rifle to kill 17 students and educators. That weapon was not purchased at Dick's.

Read the full Raw Data here.

Distortion Highlights

- Some of the coverage of Dick's announcement was slanted towards the view that it was the right decision.
- Gun control is a nuanced subject, and the coverage may have oversimplified the issue.
- Here are a few distinctions that could help evaluate the issue and its underlying causes.

The Distortion

The Knife's analysis of how news outlets distort information. (This section may contain opinion.)

Top Spin Words

- **NATIONAL OUTRAGE**
- **MARKETING STUNTS**
- **MARKETING PLAY**
- **DOUBLESPEAK**
- **IMMEDIATE AND PASSIONATE REACTION**
- **BIG MONEY**

- **SYMBOLIC WEIGHT**
- **UNDER PRESSURE**
- **BACKLASH**
- **ADDING FUEL TO AN ALREADY HEATED DEBATE**
- **GROWING WEARY**
- **DIRECTLY INTO THE STORM**

This week, Dick’s Sporting Goods announced new restrictions on some of its firearms sales — that move was followed by similar ones by Walmart and, most recently, Kroger. On social media, some people supported the decisions, while others said they infringed on Second Amendment rights. Although the news coverage we analyzed on the subject presented both sets of arguments, it was mostly slanted in favor of the perspective that greater gun control is optimal. This slant can limit understanding the issue in two ways: one, it’s a type of oversimplification, and two, the idea was implied and wasn’t supported by data or presented with alternate perspectives.

The subject of gun control is nuanced. Opinions on a single policy can vary greatly depending on party affiliation, socioeconomic background and whether people are gun owners (Pew Research Center surveys on the subject show how much opinions differ). Many discussions on gun control come down to Second Amendment rights vs. reducing gun-related violence. No one approach is “right” or “wrong,” and there’s data to support both greater and lesser restrictions. However, if we miss the deeper issue — which is that guns aren’t the root cause of the problem, but rather the weapon of choice — we may be less likely to solve the problem.

First, the media distortion

Consider these two examples from the articles we analyzed. We’ve noted subjective or dramatic language in red — it’s often the case that spin is indicative of an outlet’s bias.

The announcement, made two weeks after 17 students and staff members were killed in the school shooting in Parkland, Fla., is one of the strongest stances taken by corporate America on guns, adding fuel to an already heated national debate. It also carries symbolic weight, coming from a prominent national gun seller. (The New York Times)

Big Money is forcing a reckoning on guns ... This isn’t the first time national outrage has forced companies to rethink their gun strategy ... After the Parkland shooting, though, Dick’s once again found itself under its investors’ microscope ... Signs that Wall Street and Corporate America are growing weary of gun companies have taken a toll on stock prices. (CNN)

Notice how both outlets present their opinion as fact. ABC News’ bias was similar to the above two. Only Breitbart’s differed, in that it said Dick’s decision was an attempt “to leverage the tragic shooting of school children into a marketing opportunity” — an opinion the outlet repeated

six times throughout its article. In Breitbart's case, the subject of gun control took a back seat to the outlet's emphasis on discrediting Dick's decision.

The other three outlets implied that greater gun restrictions are good in that they'll help prevent shootings like the one in Parkland, Florida. There's some truth to this, but it's also not as simple as the outlets suggest, and we'll get to that in a moment. Implications like these can limit how we approach complex problems, because they promote the notion that there's a simple solution. Again, gun control is multi-pronged and has a long legal history (The Atlantic shares one such perspective). Furthermore, the media's implication isn't backed by data or perspectives that could otherwise equip readers with critical distinctions.

Second, data and the deeper assumption

None of the articles we analyzed provided data or perspectives to gain a more critical understanding of the problem and its complexity. Here are a few brief points we found that help to examine the issue — this is by no means exhaustive or representative of all the viewpoints out there. Note: while there is no legal definition for “mass” shootings, most sources use the term to denote shootings that result in four or more deaths. Our timeline on mass shootings in the U.S. over the last 30 years also uses the same definition.

In 2015, the U.S. averaged more than one mass shooting per day, according to the Washington Post. That seems like a lot, although an explainer video from Vox indicates mass shootings are a relatively small part of gun-related deaths:

Public mass shootings get all the attention because they're often so indiscriminate. But the truth is, mass shootings are unlike most gun deaths in America. Here's how it breaks down: According to the most recent [2013 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] data, 92 people are killed with guns every day on average. About 30 of those are homicides, of which maybe 1.5 at most can be considered part of mass shootings. Most of those killed, 58 people a day, are suicides. The rest are accidental shootings, police actions and undetermined incidents.

Some people view policy changes like Dick's as inconsequential, given they might affect a small percentage of gun-related attacks. It's also worth noting that the weapon used at the Parkland shooting wasn't purchased at a Dick's retailer.

There is data that suggests greater gun restrictions could lead to a decrease in gun-related deaths. For instance, Harvard School of Public Health's Injury Control Research Center cites data ranging from 1988 to 2013 that indicates “more guns = more homicides.” 2013 data indicates states with higher gun ownership rates have more gun-related deaths, Mother Jones reported. The same report said “Gun death rates are generally lower in states with restrictions such as safe-storage requirements or assault-weapons bans.”

Data from 2016 also indicates states with stricter gun control laws have fewer gun-related deaths. Richard Florida, an urban planning scholar and professor of business at the University of Toronto, noted those numbers included crimes, accidental shootings, suicides and acts of self-defense. Vox reported a 2016 review of 130 studies in 10 countries said “new legal restrictions

on owning and purchasing guns tended to be followed by a drop in gun violence — a strong indicator that restricting access to guns can save lives.”

This data suggests greater restrictions could lead to a decrease in gun-related deaths, at least in the short term. However, opponents of such measures say stricter gun control laws would be ineffective and would instead create other problems. For instance, stricter measures could violate Second Amendment rights, or could merely be compensated by a gun sales increase on the black market, making sales harder to trace. According to a 2015 policy analysis by the CATO Institute, proposed mandatory background checks wouldn't apply to criminals who sell guns to each other and would instead make ordinary “transactions” among gun owners criminal offenses. Others say gun control doesn't work because criminals will choose crime regardless of the weapon of choice.

A 2004 report to the National Institute of Justice studied a 1994-2004 federal ban on semiautomatic “assault” weapons (AWs) and “large capacity” magazines (LCMs). The report found that the ban's success in reducing the criminal use of the banned items “has been mixed.” It said gun crimes involving AWs declined by 17 percent to 72 percent across the six localities examined, but that it was due to a reduction in the use of assault pistols, which weren't part of the ban and are more commonly used in crime compared to assault rifles. Regarding LCMs, the report said “we cannot clearly credit the ban with any of the nation's recent drop in gun violence” because the ban had not reduced the use of LCMs in crime. It concluded, “should it be renewed, the ban's effects on gun violence are likely to be small at best and perhaps too small for reliable measurement.”

There's also a lack of scientific work on the subject, according to a RAND Corporation report released this week. The nonprofit institution assessed 62 studies on gun policy and found there's a “limited base of rigorous scientific evidence concerning the effects of many commonly discussed gun policies.” Only one of the 13 gun policies RAND examined had “supportive evidence” that the policy had an effect on a particular outcome. In that case, Rand found that child-access prevention laws led to fewer firearm self-injuries and unintentional firearm injuries and deaths among children.

More important is the root of the problem. The main reason we concern ourselves with gun control has to do with rights. Many want to uphold the right to bear arms, but not see that right defiled to cause harm to others. And the crux of the issue here has to do with understanding from where the latter problem stems.

There's the well-known argument, “Guns don't kill people. People kill people.” By now, the phrase has been put through the media and political wringer. Examined logically, it stands: violence comes from human intent, and the method of execution is but an effect, be it with guns or other means. Guns are simply tools and are therefore not to blame for violent human intent. The deeper questions have to do with what society is lacking that fosters or possibly condones unconscionable acts of violence.

To resolve the issue of violence, society needs to shift its focus from the tools or effects (guns) to the causes (intent, or whatever drives one person to kill another).

If you consider that the abuse of guns is symptomatic of an underlying violence problem, then restricting guns is effects-management at best. Again, this may reduce gun-related deaths, but it won't ultimately solve the problem of mass shootings or crime in the U.S.

Short-term, effects-management strategies aren't necessarily destructive – *if and only if* they are seen as what they are: tools to temporarily address effects. But it's a critical problem in society to confuse, and disguise, effects management as solving the cause of a problem. Trying to fix effects can keep us trapped in a sort of hamster wheel — not moving forward while maintaining the illusion that we are indeed moving. The media's biased, superficial and politicized coverage of news helps keep us immersed in this.

Note: Data from three reports on gun control measures was added to this analysis on Mar. 3.