



THE KNIFE

After the march: Exploring 5 key questions in the gun control debate

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Gun violence and gun control are emotionally and politically charged topics. Unfortunately, the media often encourages more polarization with dramatic and biased reporting. Such was the case with some of the coverage of the March For Our Lives rally on Saturday.

In order to help readers think critically about this complex and delicate subject, The Knife has compiled five questions to explore the issue, with arguments and evidence from both sides of the debate. This is not a comprehensive list of studies and viewpoints, yet it aims to provide a fact-based and balanced overview of some of the main arguments.

1) Do states with stricter gun laws have less violence?

Yes, some studies show that states with stricter gun laws or lower gun ownership have fewer firearm-related deaths.

Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America (Moms Demand Action for short), a gun violence prevention advocacy group, says, “While no single law can prevent all gun violence, research shows that strong gun laws do work.” For example, a 2013 study by Siegel et al. in the American Journal of Public Health looked at data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) for all 50 states between 1981 and 2010 and found a “correlation between higher levels of gun ownership and higher firearm homicide rates.” Specifically, the analysis “indicated that for each percentage point increase in gun ownership, the firearm homicide rate increased by 0.9%.”

A 2018 study by Kaufman et al. in the Journal of the American Medical Association examined CDC data between 2010 and 2014 for “3108 counties in the 48 contiguous states.” It found that states with “strong firearm laws” were “associated with lower firearm suicide rates and lower overall suicide rates,” as well as “lower rates of firearm homicide.”

No, while stricter gun laws may be associated with lower gun-related homicides, total homicides may not decrease.

Eugene Volokh, a professor at the UCLA School of Law, argues that “even if gun restrictions do decrease gun homicides, that effect may well be offset (or more than offset) by an increase in other homicides.” For example, some killers may use a different weapon instead of a gun. Some would-be murderers who may have otherwise been unsuccessful may now succeed if guns are

harder for defenders to get. If a reduction in gun-related homicides is matched by an increase in other homicides, the net result would be the same number of people killed.

To test his hypothesis, Volokh examined ten states with the lowest homicide rates and ten states with the highest homicide rates. He used 2012 homicide data from the Justice Department and scores from the “Brady Campaign,” which measure how strict a state’s gun laws are. He found virtually no correlation between the overall homicide rate and gun restrictions.

Note: Both sides of the debate have pointed to studies examining gun laws in other countries. These can serve as proxies for predicting how a law might work in the U.S., but ultimately a policy that works for another country doesn’t necessarily mean it will work in the U.S. This analysis only includes studies on how gun laws relate to violence in the U.S.

2) Are guns effective for self-defense?

No, not when compared to the harm they cause.

Some who favor this argument point to data showing that there are more unintentional firearm deaths than justifiable homicides in the U.S. According to the F.B.I. there were 268 “justifiable homicides” in 2015, which is when a private citizen kills someone who is committing a felony. For the sake of this argument, let’s consider gun-related injuries and deaths that aren’t homicides, and assume that reducing gun ownership or availability doesn’t correlate with a decrease in homicides. Compared to the number of “justifiable homicides,” the CDC shows there were a greater number of “unintentional firearm deaths” in the same year — 489. The CDC also shows that the number of “unintentional” non-fatal firearm injuries was 17,311 in 2015.

Furthermore, a study by Humphreys et al. in the journal of JAMA Internal Medicine found that Florida’s “Stand Your Ground Law,” which permits the use of legal force for self-defence, was “associated with a 24.4% increase in homicide and a 31.6% increase in firearm-related homicide.”

“From a personal-safety standpoint, more guns means less safety,” New York Times columnist Bret Stephens wrote.

Yes, some studies show guns are effective for self-defense.

The FBI’s statistics for “justifiable homicides” do not take into account cases of self-defense in which the potential felon is not killed, so some argue that guns may be more effective for self-defense than what these stats suggest. According to a 2005 National Research Council study titled, “Firearms and Violence: A Critical Review,” estimating defensive gun use (DGU) is complex, in part because there is disagreement over its definition. For example, DGU could include cases where guns are used in “response to victimization” or as a “means to prevent victimization from occurring in the first place.” There are also questions about the accuracy of the methods used to do the estimates. Nonetheless, estimates range from 100,000 to 2.5 million DGUs per year based on data from the 90s.

Also, the same National Research Council study cites other research that estimates the overall probability of losing property during a robbery declines from 69.9 percent to 15.2 percent with a gun, and injury during a robbery from 30.2 to 12.8 percent.

3) Should we ban semi-automatic weapons with high-velocity rounds?

Yes, the damage they can cause is severe and they are meant for military, not civilian use.

In an article by Parkland students published in The Guardian, the students propose changes to gun policies, including “Ban[ning] semi-automatic weapons that fire high-velocity rounds.” They say, “Civilians shouldn’t have access to the same weapons that soldiers do. That’s a gross misuse of the second amendment.” High-velocity refers to the muzzle velocity of a gun, or the velocity of a bullet when it leaves the barrel. High-velocity guns are typically rifles, such as an AR-15 (the gun used in the Parkland shooting) which have a muzzle velocity of 3,251 feet per second (about 991 meters per second). In contrast, low-velocity guns are typically handguns, such as a 9mm which has a velocity of 1,200 feet per second (about 366 meters per second).

High-velocity rounds do more severe damage than low-velocity ones — the former “cause large temporary cavities as they pass through tissue, producing extensive damage to adjacent structures that were not touched by the bullet.” In comparison, damage from low-velocity bullets tend to affect only “structures touched by the bullet.”

No, banning such weapons won’t have a significant impact. Handguns are responsible for more deaths than any other type of gun.

Kyle Kashuv, a student from Parkland who supports the second amendment and efforts to stop school violence, tweeted that AR-15s have “not done nearly as much damage as handguns.” According to the F.B.I. Uniform Crime Reporting statistics, 47 percent of the total murders in the U.S. in 2016 were from handguns, 2 percent were from rifles (including semi-automatic, high-velocity ones) and 22 percent were an “unknown” type of firearm. Murders from knives and “hands, fists, feet, etc,” were 11 and 4 percent of total murders, respectively. In other words, if only “known” types of guns are included, more people died from “hands, fists and feet” than from all rifles.

4) Will stricter laws (e.g. background checks) prevent criminals from obtaining guns?

Yes, background checks prevent criminals from buying guns.

Parkland students have called for “universal background checks.” Everytown for Gun Safety, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization advocating for reducing gun violence, reports that background checks in the last 20 years have prevented more than 2.5 million gun sales to people who were prohibited from buying guns (or more than 125,000 per year on average). The National Instant Criminal Background Check System website says it has made 1.3 million denials, but does not say when this number was last updated.

Not necessarily, criminals can still obtain guns illegally.

While background checks may stop criminals from buying guns through legal channels, they don't stop people from getting them illegally. The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that between 2005 and 2010, "about 1.4 million guns, or an annual average of 232,400, were stolen during burglaries and other property crimes."

Also, 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, according to a 2015 policy analysis by the CATO Institute.

It's also possible that stricter measures for acquiring guns could be correlated with an increase in gun sales on the black market.

5) Should the age limit for purchasing guns be raised to 21?

Yes, the purchase age for handguns is 21, yet you can purchase an AR-15 at 18.

Parkland students have also called on lawmakers to "raise the firearm purchase age to 21." They argue:

In a few months from now, many of us will be turning 18. We will not be able to drink; we will not be able to rent a car. Most of us will still be living with our parents. We will not be able to purchase a handgun. And yet, we will be able to purchase an AR-15.

Not necessarily, as it's uncertain whether this will reduce gun violence.

As stated above, the majority of gun-related homicides are from handguns and fewer are from rifles. So raising the age limit for rifles may not have a significant effect.

Other points of view: It's not so black and white

Here are some other perspectives that either both sides seem to agree on, or that don't necessarily support one side or the other:

- "Of more than 100 combinations of [gun] policies and outcomes, surprisingly few have been the subject of methodologically rigorous investigation," according to a 2018 RAND Corporation study titled, "The Science of Gun Policy." This may suggest that more research is needed to better understand the potential effects of different gun policies.
- Both Parkland students and President Donald Trump argue for a need to address mental health issues in the U.S. Criminologist Grant Duwe found that of 185 public mass shootings, 59 percent were committed by people "who had either been diagnosed with a mental disorder or demonstrated signs of serious mental illness prior to the attack."
- Maybe certain gun laws will reduce violence in America, maybe they won't. But it may not be so much a problem of gun violence, as a problem of violence in general caused by human behavior and psychology. Many on both sides of the debate would likely agree that there is a problem with violence in America. If the violence is more an effect of human psychology and behavior than guns, then new gun policies may not address the underlying cause of the violence. Short-term effects-management strategies aren't

necessarily destructive, as long as they are recognized for what they are — a treatment of the symptom, not the cause.

Overview of the media coverage

AP, The New York Times and Breitbart were dramatic and slanted in their reporting of the march.

AP and the Times mostly supported the view that more gun control is needed and the march would be influential in changing firearm legislation. For example, AP reported the march had “the kind of numbers seen during the Vietnam era,” and the Times said the students “seized the nation’s attention on Saturday with raised fists and tear-streaked faces” and “vowed that their grief about school shootings and their frustration with adults’ inaction would power a new generation of political activism.” What do these statements have in common? They suggest in dramatic manner that the march is likely to be a significant catalyst for change.

In contrast, the main perspective in Breitbart was that the march was an “Anti-Trump, Anti-Gun, Get-Out-the-Liberal-Vote Rally.” Although AP and the Times had a different angle than Breitbart, all three were similar in that they were slanted, or biased in favor of one perspective. As a result, AP, the Times and Breitbart were rated **84, 81 and 81 percent slanted**, respectively.

The three outlets, in the same order, were **60, 69 and 61 percent spun**, meaning the majority of their articles contained dramatic or sensational language. See “Top Spin Words” for examples from these articles, such as “historic groundswell,” “anguished and defiant” and “Get-out-the-liberal-vote rally.”

The Fox News article we analyzed was different*. It was less spun at 25 percent and it was more balanced, meaning it represented more than only one point of view. For example, along with reporting the views of those at the march, Fox also mentioned there were those, like Parkland student Kyle Kashuv, who didn’t attend and who support both the second amendment and efforts to reduce school violence. Because of this, it was less slanted with a rating of 45 percent (it still favored one perspective more than others, but to a lesser degree than the other outlets).

**Note: This analysis only included one online Fox News article, which may not be representative of the network’s broader online and TV coverage.*

Final thoughts

Rather than tell you what to think through opinionated or slanted coverage, The Knife aims to provide data-based information and help people think critically. Now that you’ve seen some arguments and facts from both side of the debate, what do you think? What are some additional arguments or viewpoints? Which side do you fall on, or do you not favor either?

Whatever your perspective may be, hopefully you can use the above information to evaluate the issue without the usual spin and slant in the media.