

# Strict Gun Control Will Seem Like War on Drugs: Jeffrey Miron

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*By Jeffrey Miron*

Jan. 14 (Bloomberg) -- The atrocity committed last weekend in Tucson, Arizona, by alleged perpetrator Jared Loughner has predictably generated calls for new gun-control laws in the U.S.

Some want bans on the extended-capacity ammunition clips that allowed Loughner to fire more than 30 shots from his Glock semi-automatic pistol without reloading. Others want improved background screening to prevent mentally unstable individuals from purchasing guns.

Would these or other laws prevent incidents like the Arizona shooting? Probably not. And such laws, along with existing gun controls, not only harm responsible gun owners but may even increase violence.

Gun-control laws fall into two main categories. Most in the U.S. are in and of themselves mild: They permit legal gun ownership for most people in most instances, while imposing modest costs on legitimate gun owners. Examples include criminal-background checks, waiting periods to purchase a gun, minimum purchase ages, and the like.

These kinds of laws, however, are unlikely to deter someone like Loughner, who appears to have contemplated and planned his attack for a long time. The reason is simple: These laws are readily circumvented.

## Loopholes for Lunatics

Consider, for example, a ban on extended-capacity ammunition clips. If these had been unavailable, Loughner could still have carried out his attack with a 10-bullet clip, and he might have aimed more carefully knowing he had less ammunition. Loughner could have brought several guns, allowing him to continue firing without interruption. Loughner could have purchased extended-ammo clips that were sold before a ban took effect (especially since the prospect of bans stimulates sales in advance of implementation). Or he could have bought a black-market clip, perhaps just by placing a classified advertisement.

Similar difficulties confront the use of background checks designed to prevent the mentally unstable from buying guns. The U.S. already has such a system, but it wouldn't have stopped Loughner from buying a gun because it only applies when a court has decreed a person to be mentally unfit, which hadn't occurred in Loughner's case.

Even a broader definition of mentally unfit probably wouldn't deter someone determined to commit violence. No matter how broad the definition, this approach does nothing to close the multiple avenues whereby anyone with sufficient cash can purchase a gun and ammunition.

### Reduced Harm

Gun controls like those being proposed may, on occasion, prevent horrific events like the Tucson shooting or at least reduce their harm, but in all likelihood only rarely. Avoiding a few such incidents is surely better than avoiding none, so these controls would make sense if they had no negatives of their own.

But gun controls, even mild ones, do have adverse consequences.

At a minimum, these laws impose costs on people who own and use guns without harming others, whether for hunting, collecting, target practice, self-defense, or just peace of mind. The inconvenience imposed by bans on extended-ammunition clips or waiting periods to buy a gun might seem trivial compared with the deaths and injuries that occur when someone like Loughner goes on a rampage. And if the only negative from these controls were such inconveniences, society might reasonably accept that cost, assuming these controls prevent some acts of violence.

### Strict Limits

But mild controls don't always stay mild; more often, they evolve into strict limits on guns, bordering on outright prohibition. And this isn't just slippery-slope speculation; a century ago most countries had few gun controls, yet today many have virtual bans on private ownership. Some of these countries (the U.K. and Japan) have low violence rates that might seem to justify strict controls, yet others experience substantial or extreme violence (Brazil and Mexico).

More broadly, comparisons between states and countries --as well as social-science research -- provide no consistent support for the claim that gun controls lower violence.

Strict controls and prohibition, moreover, don't eliminate guns any more than drug prohibition stops drug trafficking and use. Prohibition might deter some potential gun owners, but mainly those who would own and use guns responsibly.

### Folly of Prohibition

Thus the classic slogan -- when guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns -- isn't only a word play; it is a fundamental insight into the folly of gun prohibition. Such an approach means the bad guys are well-armed while law-abiding citizens are not.

Even if strict controls or prohibition had prevented Loughner from obtaining a gun, he might have still carried out a violent attack. Timothy McVeigh's 1995 Oklahoma City

bombing, which killed 168 people, illustrates perfectly that a determined lunatic has multiple ways to inflict harm.

Beyond being ineffective, gun prohibition might even increase violence by creating a large black market in guns. So if gun laws follow the path of drug laws, we can expect more violence under gun prohibition than in a society with limited or no controls.

The sad reality is that every society has a few people whose mental instabilities cause serious harm to others. This is tragic, but it doesn't justify ineffective and possibly counter-productive attempts to prevent such harm.

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