



Report: States with weaker gun laws have more gun violence. No brainer? Or politics as usual?

By: Trymaine Lee – April 3, 2013

The math seems simple enough: weaker state gun laws equal more gun violence, so says a report released by the Center for American Progress.

According to the report, states with easier access to legal guns rank higher on an aggregated scale of indicators that includes gun-related homicides, suicides and the shooting deaths of women and children.

“Across the key indicators of gun violence that we analyzed, the 10 states with the weakest gun laws collectively have an aggregate level of gun violence that is more than twice as high—104% higher, in fact—than the 10 states with the strongest gun laws,” the report, *America Under the Gun*, reads.

But is this groundbreaking stuff? While the NRA and other pro-gun groups have long balked at the idea that gun control measures have any effect on the misuse of weapons by “bad guys with guns,” most liberal politicians, many public health officials and anti-gun violence activists and academics decry lax gun laws for contributing to the violence that weapons inflict.

“I think the report confirms what I experienced during my 25 years as a federal agent—firearms laws work,” said David Chipman, a former official with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, told MSNBC.com. “What also struck me is that the release of such a report is news.”

“It is a sad state that through pressure from the gun lobby, attempts to prevent the CDC and the Department of Justice from publishing similar annual reports has been largely successful,” he added.

The report was based on previous studies of gun-related deaths by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives as well as the FBI.

The report has also garnered its share of critics, including David B. Kopel, an assistant policy analyst at the Cato Institute, who told *The New York Times* that the report’s methodology could be flawed and that it ignored the benefits of gun ownership in combating crime. “The real world experience of guns obviously is that they are harmful in the wrong hands and protective in the right hands,” Kopel told the paper. “So you want to look at both effects.”

“Is Louisiana a low-control state with a lot of crime? Absolutely,” Kopel continued. “On the other hand, New York and California are clearly dangerous states in comparison to the rest of the country, and they’re also very high-control states.”

The report's release comes as Congress prepares to battle over a spate of new gun legislation that likely will be the most vigorous debate over gun control in more than a decade. Just weeks ago, Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid, a Democrat, moved a package of gun-related bills to the legislative calendar, and proclaimed it the first order of business upon the Senate's return to Washington on April 8.

But Republicans quickly fired back, with a trio of Senators vowing a filibuster if any new gun-control measures are introduced. Reid's package of legislation includes expanded background checks and increased federal gun trafficking laws, among other provisions. One key sticking point for Republicans is the expanded background check provision, which some see as a step towards a (currently barred) national database of gun owners. And while members of Congress have for weeks now rallied constituents in their home districts at town hall meetings and fundraisers, and even President Obama on Wednesday delivered a speech in support of stricter federal gun laws at an event in Denver, it's unclear how the timing and packaging of such a report will play politically, if at all.

"Gun control is a very political issue. There are a lot of people whose minds are pretty fixed and set on how they view [the issue] and they will be skeptical of any kind of information that is counter to their own views," said Daniel Webster, director of Center for Gun Policy and Research. That group is unlikely to be swayed one way or another by a report such as this, he said, but there are others who are on the fence and are watching this latest debate play out on cable news shows and in the headlines of their local newspapers. Some politicians are watching too, Webster said, "kind of searching for what the data say."

And the data is stark, and contrary to the way the debate has largely been shaped by pro-gun groups and conservatives. They often cite Chicago's bloody woes and Illinois' rather strict gun laws as a way to undermine the idea that tough laws curb gun violence. Or they point to the murder rates of other post-industrial, mostly Northern cities like Camden or Newark to belie the point.

But according to the report, of the 10 states with the highest level of violence— based on 10 key indicators including overall firearm deaths, firearm suicides, crime-gun export rates and deaths of law-enforcement agents— eight of those states are among the 25 states with the weakest gun laws.

The top-ten ranking of states with the highest levels of gun violence are all key Republican strongholds. (Listed from top to bottom: Louisiana, Alaska, Alabama, Arizona, Mississippi, South Carolina, New Mexico, Missouri, Arkansas and Georgia.) The fact that these states and their lawmakers and representatives will likely play pivotal roles in the upcoming debate of new gun legislation is not lost on the report's authors.

"One of the ways it plays out is that some of the states that have the highest levels of gun violence also have senators that are going to be critical swing votes on the national background check bill," said Arkadi Gerney, an author of the report.

Gerney spoke to MSNBC.com on Wednesday via phone from Arizona—home state to Sen. John McCain, who has been active in trying to broker a bipartisan bill. The Center

ranked Arizona as 4th highest on the list of the most gun violent states and ranked 49 out of 50 on the strength of its gun laws.

Gerney, who earlier in the day joined survivors of the Tucson shooting at which Sen. Gabby Giffords was critically injured, said the report cuts through much of the political white noise around the issue of guns and makes plain that gun violence touches red and blue states alike.

“I think there’s a misperception that gun violence is a coastal state problem or a blue state problem, and it’s about blue states not solving their own problems and asking everybody else around the country to change the law and help them out,” Gerney said. “What the report shows is that gun violence is not a blue state problem or a red state problem but a national problem.”