



The Facts Around Matt Gaetz's Gun Violence Claims

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A hearing on gun violence turned tense Wednesday when Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz seized the opportunity to argue for a legislative priority of President Donald Trump.

Citing several recent murders of US citizens by undocumented immigrants, Gaetz argued that a wall, and not proposed gun control legislation, H.R. 8, was necessary to help fight these specific instances of violence.

"H.R. 8 would not have stopped many of the circumstances I raised. But a wall, a barrier on the southern border may have," Gaetz said.

Manuel Oliver, who lost his 17-year-old son in the Parkland school shooting took issue with Gaetz's attempt to change the hearing's focus. Oliver twice shouted at Gaetz, later telling CNN's Poppy Harlow "he should be discussing this matter in another place. Don't bring the wall as a solution for everything."

Gaetz, who later told the South Florida Sun-Sentinel he was unaware that Oliver lost a son, continued his line of argument. "The greatest driver of violence in the circumstances that I indicated was not the firearm. It was the fact that we have an immigration system that allows people to come here violently," Gaetz said, before another outcry from the audience began.

The episode of raw human emotion spilling out of a typically staid legislative space attracted considerable headlines. Many in the Parkland community have taken up the efforts of survivors from Newtown, Aurora and other mass shootings, in pushing for changes to American gun laws. The collision of one politically contentious issue (gun control) into another (Trump's much touted wall) was notable even in highly polarized political times but beyond the headlines, here's more context on the policy debates and proposals.

H.R. 8

Earlier this month California Rep. Mike Thompson intro introduced H.R. 8, a bill focused primarily on requiring "a background check for every firearm sale."

The main aspect of the bill is its requirement that most gun gifts, loans, purchases, etc. go through a licensed dealer, importer, or manufacturer. This means that if you were going to let an acquaintance borrow your gun for purposes other than hunting or target shooting at a range the "loan" would have to be processed by a gun store or other licensed individual. (This would require the normal processing fees, background checks, etc. that purchasing a gun from a gun store does currently.)

The few exceptions to this part of the bill include transfers that are “a loan or bona fide gift” between immediate family members, and domestic partners.

H.R. 8 would also allow the US attorney general to install additional regulations including forcing gun stores to put fees on every purchase. The potential price tag of these fees wouldn't have a limit.

The weapon used at the Parkland school was a legally purchased rifle, so this law would not have prevented the shooting last year. It would not have prevented the Las Vegas shooting, the Pulse nightclub shooting or the Texas church shooting.

Gun violence and undocumented immigrants

Many of the examples of gun violence by undocumented immigrants Gaetz cited were committed by individuals who were not legally allowed to possess a firearm in the first place. It's unlikely that the proposed legislation would have prevented any of the particular examples Gaetz cited. But Gaetz was using the theoretical argument that, with adequate border protections, these individuals might have been prevented from ever being in the country, let alone committing any crime.

When it comes to crime rates among illegal immigrants compared to those among US citizens, the data is incomplete. When looking at homicide rates, however, the picture becomes a bit more clear.

Alex Nowrasteh, a senior immigration policy analyst at the libertarian CATO Institute, found that in Texas during 2016 “746 native-born Texans, 32 illegal immigrants, and 28 legal immigrants were convicted of homicide.” That's a conviction rate 44% below native born Americans in Texas, he notes. Estimates of undocumented immigrants vary and this data is only based on a single state.

Would a wall work?

How much (if at all) would an additional wall or fencing decrease the flow of illegal immigration through the southern border? The unsatisfying answer is: we don't know. Some in the DHS believe walls do work, citing a 90% decrease in border apprehensions in the “Yuma Sector” of Arizona after a wall was constructed there. But, according to data from Homeland Security, the vast majority of illegal immigration comes not from the southern border but from visa overstays.

With all of these factors, it's unclear how helpful Trump's border wall would be in preventing gun violence perpetrated by illegal immigrants, a number that appears to be far smaller than its US-citizen counterpart.