# Getting Serious: Four Alternatives to the Failed Gun Control Paradigm

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America has a violence problem. Unfortunately, the conversation about how to address that problem is dominated by the gun-control paradigm: the idea that the solution to American violence is more gun control. That's worse than unhelpful — it's actually getting in the way of more productive thinking and real solutions.

If we're really serious about tackling American violence — and not just punishing, spiting, or marginalizing gun owners — there are other ways to look at the problem and develop effective solutions.

What's wrong with the gun control paradigm?

First of all, gun control doesn't work as intended. Any connection between gun policy and violence is pretty tenuous. Making the case for gun control by comparing peaceful western Europe to (comparatively) violent America is, under even modest scrutiny, simplistic to the point of being unserious.

But even if gun control was effective, it would still be problematic. Because gun control burdens the free exercise of the constitutionally-protected right to bear arms, it is always subject to compelling legal challenges and is flatly rejected by a significant proportion of the population. In addition, the enforcement of stringent gun control invariably inflicts commensurately heavy burdens upon other civil liberties — especially in poorer communities and among marginalized populations. Gun control's coexistence with the values of a free society is, at best, an uneasy one.

Take, for example, the often-proposed idea of "universal background checks," a policy which would, for example, prohibit someone from selling a firearm to his friend without a background check. Consider: these are transactions which can take place in a garage. A basement. Anywhere.

What kind of Orwellian apparatus would be necessary to meaningfully enforce such a prohibition against anyone but the most peaceable and diligent of gun owners? The War on Drugs gives us some indication of what would be necessary and also how it would nonetheless fail miserably. Just as drugs won the War on Drugs, guns would win the War on Guns — with at least as much collateral damage to our communities and civil liberties.

And gun control is even less viable in the particular context of the United States. Consider the [400 million guns](#) already in private circulation, plus the totally irreversible and ever-increasing ease of self-manufacture. No matter what laws are passed, widespread distribution and access to firearms is an immutable fact of American society — especially for people who are willing to break laws, a category into which all homicidal people fall.

Finally, we must acknowledge that [guns](#) are used defensively with considerable frequency. A low-end estimate from [Harvard's David Hemenway is 55,000 annual defensive gun uses](#) (DGUs), while other researchers have reached estimates exceeding 1 million DGUs. In any case, we should not be dismissive of DGUs or gun control's potential to diminish individuals' ability to protect themselves.

But if gun control isn't the answer to tackling violence in America, what is? The following four observations about American violence suggest some promising alternative paradigms.

#1: Suicide accounts for most American 'gun violence'.

If you visit the [statistics page](#) of the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, you're immediately confronted with an enormous banner: "41,000 AMERICANS DIE FROM GUN VIOLENCE EVERY YEAR — AN AVERAGE OF MORE THAN 110 PER DAY."

However, that banner omits the fact that most of those deaths are suicides. [A report in the Harvard Political Review](#) noted that suicides accounted for nearly two-thirds of 2019's gun deaths.

If we meet gun control groups like Giffords on their own terms and accept the inclusive statistic of "gun deaths" as our metric, it's clear that gun violence ought to be addressed primarily through a suicide-prevention paradigm.

Can gun control be part of a suicide prevention strategy? It's hard to see how. Virtually any sort of firearm would suffice to take one's own life, so there's no hypothetical situation in which something like an "assault weapons ban," [magazine](#) capacity restriction, or any other feature-based limitation would make a difference with respect to suicide.

Moreover, gun control measures — such as red flag laws — that seek to deprive people of their [guns](#) on an ostensible mental-health basis [can actually deter struggling people](#) from seeking the help they need. In this sense, a gun-control approach to suicide prevention is not merely useless — it's actually *counterproductive*.

There is an enormous amount of literature on suicide prevention and the best ways to help people who are struggling with mental health issues. Discussions of different medications, cognitive therapies, wellness practices, and [other measures](#) are far beyond the scope of this essay. But it's clear that this is where our resources and efforts should be focused.

Attempting to stop suicide by imposing gun control is like trying to stop drunk driving by banning cars: it's a completely implausible "solution" that elides the actual problem at hand.

#2 Partner and family violence matters more than you realize.

The focus of the gun control lobby is the proverbial "mass shooter," some deranged, antisocial individual who carries a "military-style" rifle into an ostensibly safe place — like a school or grocery store — and slaughters innocent people. He often has hateful or bigoted motivations for this act. His premeditation, preparation, and strong motivation make his attack especially deadly and extremely difficult to preempt or stop.

Such shootings do happen. Fortunately, they are incredibly rare and account for a vanishingly small proportion of the homicides that the U.S. experiences in a given year — about 1.5% in 2019. And of those, a large proportion are gang-related — certainly concerning, but not wholly aligned with the gun controllers' narrative.

Now, consider these facts: almost two-thirds of young child murder victims are killed by their own parents. Nearly half of all female murder victims are killed by their partners or ex-partners. And while it's common knowledge that most victims of homicide are killed by someone they know, a surprisingly large proportion — perhaps as low as 1 in 8, but possibly as high as 1 in 5 — are killed by an actual family member. Conservatively, a given homicide victim is about five times more likely to have been killed by a family member than killed with any sort of rifle.

The gun control movement's resources and efforts are overwhelmingly guided and driven by the "mass shooter" scenario, hence their fixation on policies like assault weapons bans and magazine capacity restrictions. But, even if such policies could be meaningfully implemented and enforced (they can't), it's hard to imagine those sorts of policies having any bearing on partner and familial violence.

As with suicide, the specific features of the firearm in question are a trivial matter — especially compared to a willingness to commit violence being present in a partner or family member. Almost by definition, those are the people to whom we are most vulnerable. The particular nature of the weapon isn't critical. This is also evidenced by the fact that guns are used in a significantly smaller proportion of familial homicides than in homicides overall — lesser weapons suffice.

The mass shooter fixation — and the gun fixation more broadly — is utterly unhelpful when it comes to actually curbing partner and familial violence. Instead, resources and efforts would be much better spent if they targeted partner and familial violence. Organizations that help women to escape dangerous relationships or address other aspects of domestic violence are poised to do much more good than organizations with broad and quixotic disarmament missions.

In terms of how tax dollars and law enforcement's efforts are expended, we shouldn't allow the state to pursue general and arbitrary crusades against peaceable gun owners. Instead, we should

demand protection and assistance for the children of abusive or criminally neglectful parents, the enforcement protective orders against criminally dangerous exes, and material support and safe refuge for at-risk people. Even people — including myself — who have reservations about the government's ability to execute such efforts efficiently and effectively should find them *vastly* preferable to an as-costly but much more destructive War on Guns

These are all merely suggestions, of course. There can be a robust policy debate regarding how best to address partner and familial violence, and this essay makes no pretense of having the final answers to that problem. It is certain, though, that this is a more fruitful area of inquiry than the gun-control paradigm.

#3 Prohibition II isn't helping.

The failure of the United States' experiment with alcohol prohibition has been well-documented. An unintended consequence of Prohibition was a dramatic increase in violence: without access to legal means of resolving conflicts, people involved in the illicit alcohol business — for which there was a massive consumer demand — handled their disputes and protected their interests with gunfire.

While romanticized depictions of bootleggers and mobsters have made for entertaining fictional fare, the true story hardly evokes nostalgia. The nation's homicide rate increased over 40% during Prohibition. The violence was especially pronounced in large cities, which experienced a homicide rate increase of nearly 80%. Even as more resources were directed to law enforcement, the rate of serious crimes soared and prisons overflowed. Had Prohibition been allowed to continue, it's likely that the already-disastrous situation would have deteriorated even further.

Fortunately, Americans realized that the costs of Prohibition were too high. Repeal was the clear solution. With the ratification of the Twenty-first Amendment, the nation's homicide rate dropped precipitously, falling to well-below pre-Prohibition levels within just a few years.

Unfortunately, we seem to have forgotten the lessons of Prohibition. The War on Drugs, ostensibly fought to make are communities safer, has in fact made them more violent. Noah Smith (who's certainly no champion of gun rights), writing for *The Atlantic,* observed:

*Legal bans on drug sales lead to a vacuum in legal regulation; instead of going to court, drug suppliers settle their disputes by shooting each other. Meanwhile, interdiction efforts raise the price of drugs by curbing supply, making local drug supply monopolies (i.e., gang turf) a rich prize to be fought over. And stuffing our overcrowded prisons full of harmless, hapless drug addicts forces us to give accelerated parole to hardened killers.*

In short: it's Prohibition all over again. But the effects of Prohibition's modern-day incarnation are even more insidious. After waging the Drug War for decades, we must also consider its secondary and tertiary consequences. As Thomas Eckert points out, the Drug War contributes to

family disintegration, poverty, and gang recruitment. As we will see further in the next section, underlying sociological issues like this are key elements of American violence.

#4 Guns don't beget violence, but poverty and despair do.

Poverty and lack of opportunity are strongly associated with violence. That's fairly obvious if you simply look at the geographic and demographic distributions of violence in America, which The Reality of American Violence addressed. Academic research on the subject has come to the same conclusion (see here and here). Despite being gun control advocates, these researchers understand that there are underlying sociological drivers of violence that transcend "guns" and warrant our attention.

To be sure, most people will readily accept that poverty and despair are associated with violence — that's unsurprising. However, they may see the problem of poverty as impossibly vexing and intractable. Implementing stricter gun laws might seem more feasible by comparison, even if it doesn't get to the root of the problem. Part of the appeal of gun control is the simplicity of its narrative: it seems to be a straightforward, tidy solution to a serious problem.

Alas, that isn't so. You may refer back to The Reality of American Violence once again to see why the "get rid of the guns, get rid of the gun violence" narrative is misguided. There's nothing straightforward, tidy, easy, or simple about attempting to address violence through the means of gun control.

On the other hand, there's a lot that we can do to reduce poverty and create greater opportunity. Many of these measures already have — or could plausibly attain — broad-based, bipartisan support. There are sound steps to be taken that are both feasible and meaningful. Michael Tanner of the libertarian Cato Institute presents a compelling array of such policy reforms in his book, *The Inclusive Economy: How to Bring Wealth to America's Poor.*

As a libertarian myself, I'm particularly sympathetic to Tanner's approach to poverty reduction and opportunity creation. But regardless of whether you favor Tanner's ideas or different ones, the essential point to recognize is that violence is largely a symptom of underlying social conditions. Gun control not only fails to fix, but often aggravates those conditions. Again, any critic of the "War on Drugs" should be able to see how a "War on Guns" would have (and, in some places, already has had) similar effects on individuals, families, and communities.

When speaking of reducing violence by building prosperity, it's encouraging to know that *we've already done it*, to a very large degree. That's an inescapable conclusion of Steven Pinker's The Better Angels of our Nature. Now it's up to us to make sure that that progress continues, especially on the margins of society where it's most needed — that's also where the violence is.

Conclusion

Under scrutiny, gun control is not a policy idea to be taken seriously. Especially with the widespread adoption of 3D printing and other means of self-manufacture, gun control, already of highly dubious efficacy, will gradually be rendered wholly impotent. Gun control policies will burden only the upstanding citizens who, in good faith, try to abide by them, and are [nonetheless ensnared]. If we want to get serious about addressing violence in America, there are much more promising ideas to consider.