



When It Comes to Preventing Gun Violence, Good Intentions Aren't Enough

Jonathan Blanks

March 28, 2018

Too many people are injured or killed as a result of gun violence in this country. Although the number of gun deaths has generally declined in recent decades, the recent spate of spree shootings in schools and concentrated violence in certain American cities reinforce the necessity that more can and should be done.

Unfortunately, many of the policies aimed at reducing gun violence have little or no measurable impact on safety. Some, in fact, may even inflict other harms while doing so. The unintended consequences of these proposals serve as a reminder that when it comes to reducing gun deaths, good intentions aren't enough.

School shootings, for example, have resulted in wall-to-wall media coverage. And that, in turn, has led schools to over-react to perceived threats because parents and their kids feel threatened by what should be an unthinkable menace. "Active shooter drills," in which kids and teachers simulate a response to a school gunman, have become common in schools around the country.

These drills are intended to prepare students for the unthinkable. But the main effect is to repeatedly terrify schoolchildren.

A *Washington Post* reporter recently said in an interview that "kids don't feel safe" in schools because school shootings "keep happening over and over." He recounted stories of children who were writing out wills during school lockdowns despite no active shooter in their schools. In Alaska, one school even had a police officer walk the halls firing blanks, using on the sound of gunfire to simulate the horrifying stress these situations create. No wonder kids are scared!

In fact, a student is far more likely to die in a motor vehicle accident on the way to or from school than from a school shooting. Disease and severe sports injuries are also rare, yet are much greater statistical threats to children's lives than school shootings. One risk assessment published in the *Post* estimated the odds of a public school student being fatally shot at school on any given day since 1999 at 1 in 614,000,000. It's still reasonable to want to make schools safer from shootings, but schools and parents are traumatizing children in their attempts to do so.

Meanwhile, most gun violence happens outside of schools—particularly in cities plagued by violent crime and gang activity. Yet many of the policies designed to combat urban street crime are questionably effective, and in some cases they can even make the public less safe.

Several large metropolitan police departments, for example, have developed gang databases, which are supposed to identify individuals who belong to criminal organizations or are at high-risk for violence. But as Alex Vitale noted in Friday's *New York Times*, these lists suffer from numerous constitutional and logistical problems.

Rather than engaging the at-risk youth in the community with evidence-based policies to prevent violence, too many departments create lists of young men—mostly young men of color—who may or may not be active in gangs. Vitale writes that inclusion on these lists can lead to dubious conspiracy charges and stifle release pending trial which, among other things, increases the coercive power of plea offers by the prosecutor irrespective of guilt or innocence.

Not all of the bad policies are new. New York City's now-former mayor Michael Bloomberg touted the notorious "stop-and-frisk" program as a proactive anti-gun tactic. In 2013, Bloomberg claimed stop-and-frisk was responsible for getting 8,000 guns off of New York City streets since 2002. Although that may appear to be a large number, New York City police used to stop and frisk on roughly four million people—mostly black and brown men—which yielded a firearm hit rate of about 0.2 percent.

During one year of the program, the NYPD stopped more young black men in the City than the number that live there, the vast majority of whom carried no weapons and were found to have no connection to any crime. Since the suspension of the program, violent crime in New York has continued its decades-long decline, undermining the argument that the tactic was effective—let alone necessary—in reducing violent crime. Although a recent report suggests that the court-ordered cessation of stop-and-frisk in Chicago drove the spate of gun violence in 2016, a National Institute of Justice study that tracked homicide spikes over the same period nationwide (i.e., in cities unaffected by the court order) indicates the increases were likely driven by diminished trust in police as a result of high-profile shootings by police officers and the opioid crisis.

Stop-and-frisk and similar aggressive policing tactics throughout the country are invasive violations of individual rights that erode public trust in the police. Journalist Jill Leovy wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* about the simultaneous over-policing and under-policing of black neighborhoods, and how the two interact. As Leovy describes in her true crime book, *Ghettoside*, frontline officers are often effective at making arrests for low-level offenses, often by harassing young black men, but homicide detectives have difficulty solving murders in those same neighborhoods because the aggressive tactics front-line officers use to prevent crime breed hostility and resentment. The unintended consequence is that young black men often face shakedowns and arrests on petty charges, but their murders go virtually unpunished by the system that's supposed to protect them.

Schools have a legitimate interest in keeping their students safe. Likewise, police and local governments should pursue policies to decrease gang and other street-level gun violence. But

these noble goals do not excuse any and all tactics in their name. Too often, the methods employed to stop gun violence harm far more innocent people than the underlying threat presents.

Any new policy aimed at curbing gun violence should balance the actual risks at stake against the costs to the physical and mental well-being of those it is supposed to protect, while respecting the dignity of individuals. People who face a higher risk of physical danger should not have that compounded by a violation of their constitutional rights.

Jonathan Blanks is a Research Associate in Cato's Project on Criminal Justice and a Writer in Residence at Harvard University's Fair Punishment Project.