Guns Don't Kill People, Gun Culture Does

by Charles Kenny

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As the debate over gun control deteriorates into shouting matches and threats of insurrection, most of the rest of the world looks on with confusion, viewing America’s gun culture and laws as sad and odd. U.S. gun-rights advocates are correct in their assertion that global evidence isn’t immediately compelling when it comes to the link between levels of gun ownership and homicide. And most studies of previous U.S. gun legislation suggest a limited impact on rates of violence. It turns out that’s the wrong set of questions. The international evidence is clear that it takes more than guns to cause high crime rates, yet guns enable both intentional and unintentional violence, and large, lightly regulated gun sales lead to more homicides throughout the Americas.

You don’t have to get very far in Stephen Pinker’s history of violence, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, to find ample support for the idea that there’s more to homicide than the prevalence of firearms. In precivilization, as many as 15 percent of all deaths were violent—inflicted by weapons as simple as a stone. Even today, the strongest relationship to homicide rates around the world involves overall levels of economic development, inequality, and social cohesion rather than gun prevalence.

Yet if you restrict your attention to developed countries, there is a link between guns and more violence. A survey of academic studies by Harvard University’s Lisa Hepburn and David Hemenway concluded that high-income countries with more firearms have more homicides. Americans have the highest gun ownership in the world, with nine guns for every 10 people. The U.S. also has by far the highest level of gun violence among rich countries. In another study looking at 23 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Hemenway and a colleague find that U.S. homicide rates were 6.9 times higher than rates in the other high-income countries, driven by firearm homicide rates that were 19.5 times higher.

In addition, unintentional firearm deaths in the U.S. were more than five times higher than in the other countries. Among these 23 countries, the U.S. accounted for 80 percent of all firearm deaths; 87 percent of all children under 15 killed by firearms were American children. In 2005, 5,285 U.S. children were killed by gunshot compared with 57 in Germany and none in Japan—a country with some of the toughest gun controls in the world. In America, people who live in houses with guns are more likely to be killed. Homes with guns are 12 times more likely to have household members or guests killed or injured by the weapon than by an intruder. And while the guns-violence relationship is not perfect across or within rich countries, the counter-examples have implications that gun-rights advocates might not like. Consider Switzerland, which has the second-highest gun ownership rate amongst OECD countries, yet a very low overall homicide rate—one-third the OECD average. While Swiss gun-related homicides are more common than elsewhere in the OECD, that still suggests that the mere availability of guns doesn’t necessitate a lot of violent crime.

Yet if any country understood the “well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state” part of the U.S.’s Second Amendment, it would be Switzerland. Gun possession is required as part of compulsory military service. Increasingly, those guns are being kept in depots, so they’re not immediately available. Military service requires soldier-citizens to attend repeated, extensive training sessions from age 20 to 50. Switzerland is a prime example of why culture and institutions matter to the relationship between guns and violence.

Meanwhile, Mexico provides a case study of what happens when more guns meet weak institutions. In the four years following the lapse of America’s assault weapons ban in 2004, 60,000 illegal firearms seized in Mexico were traced back to the U.S. Luke Chicoine, an economist at the University of Notre Dame, estimates that the expiration of the federal assault weapons ban led to at least 2,684 additional homicides in Mexico. Similarly, a study from New York University researchers found that homicides spiked in Mexican border towns after 2004, particularly those most involved in narcotics trafficking. The spike was far less dramatic in towns that bordered California, which had a state-level assault weapon ban that remained in place after the U.S. ban lapsed. A survey of court cases reported in their paper found that 3 percent of trafficked guns came from California, vs. 29 percent from Arizona and 50 percent from Texas.

The Swiss and Mexican cases suggest that the U.S. should take the full text of the Bill of Rights a little more seriously if it wants a safe gun culture. Perhaps we should allow anyone to have an assault weapon—but only if they serve in the National Guard for 30 years.

Because of the importance of broader culture and institutions to rates of gun violence, and because of the massive number of guns already circulating, it’s quite plausible that the incremental regulations being considered in Washington will have little impact on overall U.S. violence. After all, the consensus is that the assault weapons ban had, at best, a modest effect on reducing crime. That’s not to say that more guns reduce crime—the evidence clearly suggests the opposite. In particular, tougher regulations governing magazine size or assault weapon sales might well reduce the toll of mass shootings. China saw a school stabbing spree on the same day as the Newtown massacre—22 children were injured, none killed. In attempted mass killings, the type of weapon really does matter, and fewer guns circulating would lead to fewer accidental deaths and suicides.

Yet most of the weak and partial gun control legislation that’s been tried in this country so far has had a marginal impact on overall violent crime rates. If America really wanted to reduce gun deaths toward the levels seen in the rest of the developed world, authorities would need to confiscate most guns from private hands and considerably toughen rules on training and safety. There’s no appetite in either party for such a switch.

The White House’s push for a stronger version of the assault weapons ban, limits on magazine size, and improvements in registrations and background checks still makes sense—not only because it might reduce the lethality of mass shootings in the U.S. but also because it might save lives throughout the Americas. However, until the U.S. sees its 13,000 annual shooting deaths as a problem meriting serious gun-ownership restrictions, nothing much will change.

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