

## Some Comments on the Gun Control Debate

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As Humanists we like to claim we are committed to solving problems by applying rational thought and critical thinking, I do not think either of these tools is commonly applied to the gun control debate which seems emotion driven and fraught with magical thinking.

### Comments on Joan Chittister's Essay

1. "The automatic weapons that are being legalized under the guise of hunting equipment would blow any deer to pieces far too small to eat." I have heard of no effort to legalize any automatic weapons. The weapon that people are concerned about is AR-15 and similar weapons. The AR-15 fires a .223 caliber bullet with a muzzle energy of about 1,200 foot-lbs. Most people consider this round not powerful enough for deer hunting. The old classic hunting rifle the .30-06 (a WWI vintage bolt action rifle) has a muzzle energy of about 2,800 ft-lbs.
2. "Check figures in Iraq and Afghanistan . . ." First about 80% of the deaths in Iraq have been from IEDs (bombs) not gunfire, so the soldiers' weapons would hardly be expected protect them from IEDs. The deaths from gunfire are close to the number killed in accidents, which would indicate the soldiers are effectively defended against enemy gunfire. Second, without knowing enemy death rates from our gunfire we have no way of knowing how effective the soldiers' weapons were at defending themselves. I doubt if she is recommending we send unarmed soldiers to occupy foreign countries, though perhaps that is her point. (Of course the obvious solution is not to send soldiers to occupy foreign countries).
3. " 56 gun deaths in Australia and 11,344 in US"

Here is a table showing homicide rates and gun ownership rates from Wikipedia

Country	Gun Owner Ship	GO Rank	Homicide Rate	Homicide Rank
USA	89	1	3.6	15
Canada	31	13	0.5	32
Mexico	15	42	14	7
Switzerland	46	4	0.52	31
Australia	15	42	0.09	62

Note Switzerland has half the gun ownership rate of the US and is number 4 in the world in gun ownership, but the homicide rate is 1/7th of the US rate. Canada has about 1/3rd the gun ownership rate, but the homicide rate is also 1/7th of the US. Mexico has about 1/6th the gun ownership rate but 4 times the homicide rate. What is clear is that there is no clear correlation between gun ownership rates and homicide rates. Countries can have lots of guns like Switzerland and low homicide rates, or they can have severe gun laws like Mexico and have very high homicide rates. This same analysis can be done between states in the US and also not see a direct correlation between gun ownership rates and gun homicide rates.

## General Comments

### 1. *We need more background checks and stop sales at gun shows*

Only about 15% of people committing crimes with guns are the legal owner of the gun they are using, therefore, if the background check was 100% accurate in foretelling the future and preventing anyone that was going use it for a crime from buying it, it could reduce the gun crime rate by no more than 15%. It would of course be much less than that because if they could not buy a gun legally they would get it the way 80% of the criminals get it by borrowing it, buying from an illegal dealer or stealing it. In a FBI study of how inmates got guns, 2% reporting getting it from flea markets or gun shows. <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/fuo.pdf>

### 2. *Outlawing assault rifles is important to reduce gun violence*

The data collected by the FBI does not break down crime by the exact type of weapon, just by handgun, rifle or shotgun. Based on the FBI statistics, rifles of all types are only responsible for about 3.8% of all firearm homicides. Nobody knows how many “assault rifles” there are in the country, but when estimates are done, the numbers they get are in the millions. There are about 110 million rifles of all types in the US. So assault rifles are perhaps about 5% of the total number of rifles. If they are 10 times as likely to be used in crime as a regular rifle, then making all assault rifles magically disappear would reduce homicide rates by less than 2% and that assumes that if people could not use an assault rifle they would not substitute another weapon. While about 10% of inmates said they owned assault type weapons, only about 1% of them used them to commit the crime they were incarcerated for.

There was a federal assault weapons ban for 10 years from 1994 to 2004. A [2004 study](#) by the National Research Council found that academic studies of the assault weapon ban "did not reveal any clear impacts on gun violence." A [report](#) from the Department of Justice and the National Institute for Justice concluded that the ban had “no discernible reduction in the lethality and injuriousness of gun violence, based on indicators like the percentage of gun crimes resulting in death or the share of gunfire incidents resulting in injury.”

California has had an assault weapons ban since 1989 and the gun homicide rate is approximately the same as Texas, a large state which has much less restrictive gun laws.

### 3. *We need to save the children*

About 1% of all firearms homicides are children under 12, which is about 86 children per year. Flu kills about 100 children per year. According to the CDC, there were 1,151 motor vehicle deaths and 39 bicycle deaths of children 12 and under in 2010. There are obviously more cost effective ways to save the children than gun laws, which evidence does not show to be an effective means to save children’s lives.

### 4. *The police say we need stricter gun control laws*

Of course they do, if I was a policeman I would too. I can think of two reasons for this. One is that it is scary for police to routinely deal with armed people. I am sure it makes them nervous when they see the bulge of a gun when they are talking to someone on the street, even if the person is a law abiding citizen with a proper permit. The other reason is that police have no

motivation for people to resist criminals and in fact they routinely tell people to comply with criminals. If people effectively resisted criminals and were not afraid of criminals the police would be out of a job. Like most people with power, they want a monopoly on that power.

Ask police officers if they would be willing to give up their guns. The same arguments about how guns are more likely to kill the owner than be used to kill a criminal apply to police as well as other citizens. Most police never shoot anyone in the entire career. The argument that the presence of guns will escalate violence would apply to police as well as to private citizens.

#### 5. *Analysis of gun control data*

It is clear from reading books about the subject and looking at the websites from both sides of the debate that both sides have made decisions based on emotions and then go mining data to support their position. I have found studies referenced by both sides, each carefully selecting which data to present from the study to support their position. I am convinced that neither increasing concealed carry, i.e., the ability of people to defend themselves with guns, nor severely restricting guns has any detectable effect on gun violence. What each side sees as obvious and common sense is not supported by critical examination of the studies that have been done. Both sides are driven by fear, and for 90% of the most ardent people on both sides of the debate the fear is unjustified. At the risk of gross stereotyping, neither the old white guys who want guns to defend themselves, or the women that are afraid of guns have a significant risk of becoming a victim of gun violence.

One bit of data that surprises people is that while the number of guns in the US has been steadily climbing the firearms homicide rate has been steadily declining since 1991. The current rate is about ½ the rate it was in 1991. Nobody really knows why, but there are some fun theories. One is that we have more police, another is that we have more people in jail, another is changing age demographics. One of the best is that the decline is due to the availability of abortion in the 1970s which decreased the number of unwanted children which would have been getting to their maximum crime years in the 1990's. Another intriguing recent theory is that the removal of lead from gasoline is responsible for the decline.

<http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2013/01/lead-crime-link-gasoline>

How many homicides do you think there are per year in Santa Barbara? There have been 15 in the last 10 years, in several years there were none. The majority of those have been gang related and involved knives rather than guns (though I don't have statistics to support that, but that is my recollection from reading the news). For middle class folks, cars and healthcare mistakes are much more serious threats to your life.

#### 6. *Practicality of gun laws*

Most gun laws are apparently written by people with no knowledge of firearms and many of them make almost no sense. Guns can become illegal depending on irrelevant aspects such as if there is a thumb hole in the stock or not or if the barrel has a threaded end. Terms like "assault

weapon” and “armor piercing ammunition” are actually very difficult to define. This is probably the attraction of something like magazine limits which are fairly easy to define. If you look at the guns most used in crimes, they are exactly the guns that police and citizens choose to carry for self defense, which are 9mm or 38 caliber handguns. There is no gun that is only useful to criminals and not useful to someone else for self defense or sport.

#### 7. *Magazine size limits*

This is one of the favorite laws and I have never seen data on how many people are killed with the 11<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> round in a magazine compared to those killed by the 1<sup>st</sup> 10 bullets. Magazines can be changed in a second or so, and even revolvers can be loaded in couple of seconds. The reason usually made for the law is that “nobody needs large magazines”. However, note that almost all police officers now carry pistols with 16 or 18 round magazines and they also carry additional ones on their belts. They seem to think they need that to defend themselves. Another aspect to things like this is that there are always unintended consequences of changes made to fix something. If you restrict magazine sizes that will likely cause two changes in handgun purchases. One is that people will choose more powerful handguns, rather than a 9mm (.38 caliber) gun with a magazine capacity of 16, they might choose a .45 caliber gun with a magazine capacity of 10 rounds. The other potential change is that people will choose smaller easier to conceal weapons. It is much easier to make a small 10 round 9mm pistol than one using the typical magazine size. Smaller more powerful handguns might be more dangerous on the street than the ones typically purchased now. The more powerful rounds would cause more damage to anyone hit by them, and the easier concealment would increase the risk to police and also increase the chance that someone would carry a weapon. The 10 round magazine limit has been in effect in California for many years, but as mentioned earlier it has murder rates the same as states without that limit.

#### 8. *Time for changes to have any meaningful effect*

One problem with any attempt to regulate weapons in the US is that there are over 300,000,000 firearms in circulation now. Firearms, unless left out in the rain, will last indefinitely. Many Civil War weapons are still useable today. It is difficult to wear out a firearm, most will fire many thousands of rounds of ammunition without requiring repairs. There are also millions of rounds of ammunition in circulation which also have a very long life.

#### 9. *Suicide*

Suicide is the cause of the majority of firearms deaths. (In 2005, 55% suicide, 40% homicide, 3% justifiable homicide, and 2% accidents). This could be the best argument for some kind of gun control, but I have not heard of any measures being considered that would address this problem. This is an aspect of gun control I have not read much about. Certainly magazine size and assault weapons are totally irrelevant to this issue. It would seem that waiting periods (like the 10 day period in CA) or some kind of mental health background check (a bit of a civil liberties issue) would be the most likely measures that could have some effect on this cause of gun violence.

#### 10. *The 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment*

This was written so long ago, under such different conditions, it like trying to apply the laws of Leviticus to 21<sup>st</sup> century moral issues. Both sides will endless debate the meaning of this with no resolution in sight. If you believe the founders meant that Militia is the modern National Guard, then the amendment has no application to citizens. If they meant the Militia means all able bodied men, then **any** gun control law at all would be unconstitutional. Neither of those positions has much popular support.

It would seem the best approach would be to make some new amendment that specifically addresses a person's right to defend himself (or herself) and what are appropriate limits to that right.