The Tragic Irony of Self-Defense Culture

I grew up in a relatively small town in southern Wisconsin. When I was old enough, I took the

required safety class and began to hunt. Many of my friends that also hunted were very outspoken in

their support for gun rights. However, I typically took a liberal stance in politics, and this extended to my

views on gun control. I saw gun control in much the same way that many people do – as the right to

self-defense versus the right to feel safe without a gun. However, I also realized that mass shootings

were very rare and that violence in my small community was also almost non-existent, and I therefore

viewed gun control as an issue of principle. To me, any benefits that gun control carried would most

likely be for the good of others, instead of for my own personal safety or the safety of those around me.

Last May, I had an experience that changed these views in two ways. First, I realized that unfortunately,

guns can have tragic consequences for anyone. Second, I concluded that the ways that many people

traditionally view gun control and gun rights are flawed, and that until these misconceptions are

corrected, even strong government action would be unlikely to prevent guns from taking thousands and

thousands of lives every year.

Last May, some friends of mine noticed that a student they knew well wasn't answering his

phone. The night before, he'd gone out to a party, and they knew he'd left early and returned home by

himself. They grew worried and decided to stop by his house.   They found him lying dead on his

bedroom floor.   He had shot himself with a gun he had taken from a housemate's room.

Every year, guns kill about 32,000 people in the U.S [7]. On average, almost 100 people are

killed every day. However, people tend to miss a key point – more than two thirds of these total annual

gun deaths are suicides. Close to 1,000,000 people attempt suicide every year in the United States [9].

Fortunately, most of these attempts are not fatal – falls, poisoning/overdose, and cutting are only

effective in 31%, 2%, and 1% of cases, respectively. In contrast, 85% of people that attempt suicide

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using a firearm die [7]. Only about one in forty suicide attempts is carried out with a gun, but these attempts are responsible for more than half of suicide fatalities.

Mental health problems are widespread in the United States, affecting almost one in five adults in any given year [6]. These problems are often only temporary. Seventy percent of people that attempt suicide and survive never attempt it again, and less than one in ten people that attempt suicide and survive eventually die in a subsequent attempt [2]. However, suicide attempts involving guns are almost always fatal. These people never get a second chance.

Across different racial and economic portions of the US population, opinions on guns vary dramatically, and deaths by firearm take dramatically different forms. In the U.S., 61 percent of white people consider gun rights more important than gun control [1]. Gun owners and gun rights supporters have a variety of motives for owning guns, but 63% of people believe that having a gun under their roof will keep them safer during a robbery or assault. However, of gun deaths among white people in the US every year, 77% are the result of suicide and less than one fifth are murders [8]. Having access to a firearm triples an individual's risk of committing suicide. In addition, only about 250 justifiable homicides, or successful self-defense shootings, occur each year. Americans who own guns are almost twice as likely to be murdered as those who don't, and individuals who wield guns in self-defense during robberies or other assaults are actually 4.5 times more likely to be killed than if they had been unarmed [10]. The guns that white Americans own are statistically far, far more likely to eventually kill a member of their own family or to be used in a suicide attempt than to ever be used successfully in self-defense.

Opinions regarding gun control and the causes of gun deaths are dramatically different for black Americans than for white Americans. Only 34% of black citizens favor gun rights over gun control [1]. Additionally, for black citizens, 82% of overall gun deaths are homicides. Among US citizens overall, the annual murder rate per capita is 3.9/100,000. However, among black males age twenty to twenty nine

in the United States, the rate in 2012 was 90.4/100,000, an astounding 23 times higher than that for the US population as a whole. If you're a twenty-five-year-old black male in the United States, you're more likely to be murdered with a gun than if you were an average citizen of *any other country in the world*, including Central and South American countries ravaged by dangerous drug cartels and notorious for rampant gun violence[8].

Guns are deeply embedded in the culture of the United States, and this will likely be true for years and years to come. There are more guns per capita in the United States than in any other country in the world, and actually more guns in the United States than people. Our gun laws are frequently discussed in politics, and a wide variety of measures have been considered to reduce gun deaths. However, the second amendment was approved more than two hundred years ago, and no matter what changes occur, law-abiding citizens will likely always have the right to bear guns. To be clear, I don't think this fundamental right should be removed. However, if more people realized the dangers that their own guns pose to themselves and to their families, or knew that in a self-defense situation, their guns would increase their probability of dying [10], I think that many people would be far less inclined to own these weapons.

If more people understood that their self-defense firearms actually put them at an increased risk of dying[10], these individuals would likely be less inclined to keep guns around the house, and those that did keep guns around might take stronger measures to keep the guns secured. This reduced access to guns would cause the rate of suicide fatalities to drop. People who were robbed or assaulted would be almost five times less likely to be murdered than if they had been armed [10]. There would also be less guns in circulation, they would be harder to come by on the black market, and for both reasons, total annual gun homicides would likely drop as a result. Strict gun control laws aren't necessary to reduce annual gun deaths – people simply need to understand that self-defense firearms are statistically

counterproductive as far as their personal safety is concerned. Any resulting drop in gun ownership would cause a corresponding drop in fatalities.

Someone commits suicide with a firearm every fifteen minutes in the United States. Most of these guns are not illegal - they are guns that their owners likely thought were keeping them and their families safe, until they did just the opposite. No matter what actions our government takes, most of these guns will never be taken away – it is up to us to decide if we really want them or not.

I'm not proposing that the government take your guns, or saying that you should feel morally required to get rid of them. If you hunt, target shoot, or simply feel safer with a gun in your home, then by all means, the decision is yours. All I wish is for people to rise above the macho images of gun ownership that are so common in our culture, make an informed decision regarding gun ownership, and take appropriate actions to secure their weapons if they choose to own guns. Otherwise, until people understand the considerable risks posed by gun ownership, I'm afraid that our country's suicide rate will continue to be high, and until the astronomical number of firearms in circulation is reduced, I'm afraid that Americans will continue to be murdered at rates unlike those seen anywhere else on earth. Until last May, I never had any personal experience to associate with the statistics concerning suicides and murders by firearm. After seeing the devastation that a single suicide causes, I can only hope that in the future, gun deaths will not have to be a tragic, unavoidable reality for thousands and thousands of people every year.

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