How the US can have guns but fewer gun problems

David Hemenway professor

The US will probably always have lots of guns, so we need to learn to live with them. Currently, we are dying from them. We are also causing many deaths in neighbouring nations, as US guns are readily available to criminals in Mexico, Jamaica, and Canada.

Compared to other high income countries, the US is average in terms of (non-gun) crime and violence. But we have many more private guns per capita, particularly handguns and military grade firearms. We also have the weakest gun laws. In 2015, the US death rate from firearms was over 11 times higher than that of other high income countries. It has increased by 20% since then. In 2020, more than 120 American civilians per day were killed by guns.

How can the US learn to live more safely with guns? The key is to have a national plan. Current policy discussions are fragmented, considering only isolated measures, one-at-a-time. We need a vision. Perhaps it could come from a national non-partisan commission of independent experts that agree on a goal (for example, access to guns for home defence combined with low rates of firearm crime, homicide, suicide and accidents) and provide a blueprint for achieving and maintaining that outcome.

Here are some items that the blueprint might contain.

First, we must make safer guns. For example, ensure that guns that cannot go off inadvertently or when they are dropped. Guns should be made childproof—currently 2 to 4 year olds have relatively high rates of accidental gun death, and they typically shoot themselves. Semi automatic handguns should not fire if the magazine is removed—the most common cause of accidental gun death in children is believing a gun is unloaded when it can still fire a bullet.

To reduce crime, it should be much more difficult to obliterate a gun’s serial number—currently, many recovered guns are untraceable; all guns should be capable of ballistic fingerprinting to help identify from a spent bullet the precise firearm used—it should also be possible to determine who originally bought a particular gun, along with the last legal owner (through gun registration); and guns should be difficult for unauthorized persons to use. Among other benefits, smart guns would decrease gun theft. Over 300,000 guns a year are stolen in the US, according to national estimates.

The US government should undertake research and development to advance both microstamping and smart gun technology. The government should also conduct research on better alternatives for self defence than handguns, which are relatively ineffective without considerable training, and pose a substantial health threat to family members from suicide, accidents, and interpersonal violence.

To reduce mortality from mass shootings, military weapons should be left to the military. State bans on large capacity magazines have been associated with fewer and less lethal mass shootings.

Many more groups and institutions should be actively involved in reducing the harms caused by firearm violence. These groups include medical providers and the media, insurers, and standards writing organizations, unions and universities, foundations and the faith community.

There are many ways to reduce violent, suicidal, and unsafe behaviours that don’t involve changing our firearm system, including improvements to mental health, educational, and criminal justice systems. Political leaders should ensure that policies enhance community social capital—improving parenting, and reducing discrimination, bullying, and alcohol misuse for example. We could and should do these and myriad other things to make our society better—even if we did not have a gun violence problem. But by far the most effective, and cost-effective, way to reduce harm related to firearms is to improve the current firearm system.

Every part of this system can do more: including gun manufacturers, retailers (use best practices to prevent straw purchasing—the buying of guns for illegal possessors), and owners (store guns safely to prevent theft and unauthorized use).

More comprehensive background checks would help prevent the legal acquisition of firearms by people at risk of harming themselves or others. Licensing of gun owners and the registration of handguns would help encourage responsible gun ownership. Strict liability laws could provide financial incentives for all parts of the firearm system to reduce socially detrimental use of firearms.

Government needs to establish better data systems, fund research, help write standards, and pass reasonable gun laws. Current special provisions that protect the gun industry must be eliminated. Most important is the creation of an agency for firearms analogous to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration which mandated safety measures in cars such as airbags, seatbelts, and collapsible steering columns. The new gun agency’s sole mission would be to help reduce harms caused by firearms. The current system empowers people whose business mission is to sell more guns. It should instead empower prevention experts whose paid goal is to keep us safe from being shot.

The Onion, America’s satirical news outlet, often publishes its most iconic headline after mass shootings: ‘‘No Way to Prevent This,’ Says Only
Nation Where This Regularly Happens.” The experience of every other high-income country in the world shows that there are plenty of ways for the US to prevent most gun deaths—and they all involve getting better control over guns.

Competing interests: none

Provenance and peer review: commissioned, not peer reviewed.

7 Bijur P. A funny thing happened on the way to the meeting: on guns and triggers. Inj Prev 1998;4:771.doi: 10.1136/ip.4.1.77-a.