

Q&A: Other countries put lives before guns. Why can't we?

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As police fanned out Thursday in pursuit of the gunman who killed 18 people in Lewiston, Maine—the deadliest U.S. mass shooting of the year—the nation once again confronted its epidemic of firearms violence. Every year in the U.S., tens of thousands of lives are lost to gun-related murders and suicides.

The Gazette spoke with David Hemenway, a professor of health policy at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center, about the seemingly intractable problem of gun deaths in America. In the short term, he said, we won't make much progress without a forceful political response to rampages like the one in Maine. Longer term, he hopes recently launched [research initiatives](#) might change minds and spur life-saving action.

The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

GAZETTE: What are some things that ordinary people can do to address gun violence?

The biggest thing is to vote for the right people. It's hard to think that a single regular person is going to make a big difference in reducing gun violence, but we have known for the last 30 or 40 years that the overwhelming majority of Americans, including Republicans and Democrats, non-gun owners and gun owners, want universal background checks—they want everyone to be checked before they can legally get a gun, as is done in virtually every other high-income country in the world. What kind of democracy is this if there is always a majority of people in Congress who won't ever support what the people want? So you have to vote those people out.

If there's one policy that would be really good to have, it would be licensing of all [gun owners](#) and requiring universal background checks to get a license. We do that in Massachusetts, and that's part of the reason we do so well in Massachusetts—not relative to the world, but relative to other states.

GAZETTE: Are there other things that people can do that might have an impact?

Another thing the [average person](#) can do is find advocates and researchers who are trying to do good work and give them money. There's a lot of good organizations now, Giffords, Brady, Everytown, and so forth, that are trying to make the world a little safer in terms of gun issues. They don't have nearly the lobbying power of the gun lobby.

GAZETTE: Is there a public education piece of this? Do we know enough?

We know that a gun in the home increases the risk of death to people in the home. And we know that a gun in the home, on average, increases the risk for the whole community. But there's so much we don't know. Just in terms of some of the things I want to do research on this coming year, I don't think there's been a good research paper on open carry. And what about ghost guns? If we're going to have guns, you name an issue and we want to figure out reasonable rules for guns so they're not so detrimental to society. We need to know much more than just, "On average, more handguns are generally bad for [public health](#), and stronger gun laws are generally better for public health."

GAZETTE: What about gun ownership for protection? In the news coverage of the Maine shootings, I read interviews with people who said, "We have our own guns, we're not worried."

Of the people with guns, most have them for protection, but the evidence is pretty strong that having a gun for protection is a detriment to the people who have the gun. All the primary potential public health benefits and costs of having a gun are pretty rare, but some are much rarer than others. The chance that you're actually going to need a gun to protect your home is much lower than the combined chance that

somebody will steal your gun or you'll have a gun accident or someone will try to commit suicide with a gun or the gun will be used in intimate partner violence.

One thing that you absolutely should do if you're going to have a gun: Keep it safe so it doesn't get stolen and/or used by an inappropriate person. We estimate there are 350,000 guns a year that are stolen. Nobody knows the exact number, but that's a very reasonable ballpark estimate.

GAZETTE: Have we made any progress on this issue?

In the short run, things have gotten worse. Gun homicides and suicides have recently been increasing, and mass shootings have skyrocketed. But some things have gotten better—for the long run. We now have a good data system for violent deaths, which is going to really help us figure out what's going on. And there's more money for gun research, though still not a lot compared with the size of the problem.

Over time we're going to learn lots more, and we are going to have good research that I believe will show, over and over again, that a gun in the home is dangerous for the family, and that stronger gun laws will save lives. This is like the situation we had with cigarettes, when most people initially thought cigarettes were not that dangerous—after all, most people smoked—but the research kept showing the dangers of cigarettes in terms of cancer, in terms of heart disease, in terms of children in the household.

I suspect we're going to have more and more good research saying, "This gun is making you less safe, your family less safe, and your community less safe, and these are the specific types of gun policies and programs

which will reduce the problem."

GAZETTE: But in the meantime, in the short term, we have to just have to live with the violence and loss?

If we had different people in power, in terms of the judiciary, in terms of Congress, we might be able to do a lot of things. Every other high-income country does better than we do—not just a little better but a lot better. Every one. France does a lot better, New Zealand does a lot better, Korea does a lot better, and on and on. The U.S. is a bad outlier in terms of [gun violence](#) compared to every other high-income country.

I teach at the public health school and we have many international students. They are just flabbergasted: What is the matter with the U.S.? How can our leaders let children get killed and just say to families, "Oh, my thoughts and prayers are with you," when it's clear that many policies can help. There may not be large numbers of good empirical studies for any particular policy or program, but sometimes it's like taking a parachute when you're jumping out of an airplane—it's probably better than not having the parachute, even though there haven't been any randomized control trials proving that.

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