

Firearm Suicide: The Unacknowledged Cost of Firearms

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This paper addresses the gun control debate by turning the reader's attention away from mass shootings and to suicide, from public spectacle to private troubles. The author explores the reasons that mass shootings have failed to generate a compromise position between gun-ownership advocates and gun-control advocates, but makes a case that firearm suicide, a far more common problem than mass shootings, has the potential to trigger support from moderates on both sides of the issue. The paper is ambitious, well researched, and well argued.

The December San Bernardino shooting brought the gun control debate once again to the front page. Mass shootings always do. President Obama called for stronger gun control and the NRA led with their mantra "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." Gun control remains one of the most intractable issues in the U.S. partly because the debate is framed in an antagonistic manner, putting gun owners on the defensive (*The Economist* 2015). This antagonistic framing often neglects to mention that the largest percentage of firearm related deaths are suicides (Center for Disease Control 2015b; Center for Disease Control 2015a). The seriousness of firearm suicide in the U.S. calls for cooperative not combative solutions rooted in means removal.

While mass shootings are the most dramatic scenario for use in the gun control debate, they are not the most effective. They are outliers. Florida State University Professor of Criminology Gary Kleck contends that mass-shootings prove ineffective catalysts for policy change because, of all gun deaths, they are the hardest to predict and prevent, making

their arguments for stronger gun control irrelevant (Kleck 2009, 1462). Furthermore, they represent a small percentage of total firearm deaths. The Washington Post reports that the four worst mass shootings in the past fifteen years account for 84 deaths, roughly equivalent to the average daily firearm death in the U.S. from 2003 to 2012 (Millman 2015). Of those 84 deaths, on average 57 are firearm suicides, meaning that roughly every hour of every day at least two people in the U.S. commit suicide using a firearm (Center for Disease Control 2015b). According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), 11,208 firearm homicides occurred in the U.S. in 2013 as opposed to 21,175 firearm suicides (Center for Disease Control 2015b; Center for Disease Control 2015a).

Statistics like these underscore the tragic reality that firearm suicides are not just a backdoor approach to the issue of gun control but rather the most numerically significant issue in this debate. Though they rarely make the news, they do significantly affect communities. For Christians the issue of firearm suicide should be especially compelling. Though

the Bible does not explicitly forbid suicide, the Judaic tradition condemns suicide “performed out of despair” because it “den[ies] God’s goodness and purpose” (“Suicide - Oxford Reference” 2015). Self-destruction is not God’s plan for His children. The U.S. National Library of Medicine reports that suicide is often a cry for help or an expression of hopelessness not a genuine attempt to end one’s life (“Suicide and Suicidal Behavior” 2015). Unfortunately when the attempt is successful, neither help nor hope ever come. Acts 16 recounts how Paul and Silas prevented the Philippian jailer from committing suicide. They then led him and his entire household to the Lord (Crossway 2010). This story illustrates the potentially damning consequences of a rash suicide. Christians, called to share God’s love and hope, should seek to prevent any behavior that decreases unbelievers’ chances of hearing the Gospel. 85% of the time no one can reach them once the trigger is pulled (“Lethality of Suicide Method” 2015).

Unfortunately, believers and unbelievers are equally prone to commit suicide (Hsu 2015). As 1 Corinthians 12:26 reminds us, the Body of Christ rejoices and suffers as a whole therefore care should be taken to support each member. Knowing the prevalence of suicidal thoughts among their church family, “stronger” believers should be willing to lay aside some privileges or even rights so as not to present a stumbling block in accordance with Paul’s instructions in Romans 14 and 15. Arguably, stronger gun control in the U.S. could be one of these cases. Easily accessible firearms present a real danger to those tempted by suicide. Christians should be open to researching and promoting suicide prevention efforts.

Safer gun storage methods and firearm reduction are the most obvious solutions to the alarmingly high firearm suicide rates. One such approach attempted by researchers Carbone, Clemens and Ball in a pediatric clinic in Arizona showed encouraging results. The researchers conducted an experiment where families at the clinic completed a pre-experiment survey which determined gun ownership and gun storage methods. Only families with firearms were included in the study. Half of the families with firearms were randomly assigned as the control group and the other half as the intervention

group. The intervention group received a gun safety lecture, a brochure and a free gun lock costing \$6.99. A month later both groups were mailed a follow-up questionnaire. To improve response rates, researchers followed up with a phone-call if the mail questionnaire was not returned. 25% of the intervention group improved their gun storage mechanism as opposed to only 4.8% of the control group. An additional 22% of the intervention group removed firearms from their house entirely (Carbone, Clemens, and Ball 2005). Understandably these results may seem underwhelming but at least they represent a decent start. The key strength of this method is its non-antagonistic approach. It does not hold the threat of “the government is coming to take away my guns.” It allows NGOs to cheaply educate and spread awareness.

However, there are always skeptics. It is possible that these results would not be duplicable. In addition, the NRA doubts the premise of the intervention claiming that changing access to firearms will not affect suicide rates because the attempter will merely switch their method (“NRA-ILA | Suicide And Firearms” 2015a). This argument lacks evidence. In reality, means substitution is rare. Studies conducted in the UK, Israel and Sri Lanka show little to no means substitution after the preferred suicide method was made less accessible (Miller, Azrael, and Barber 2012, 402).

An understanding of the decision to attempt suicide sheds light on this lack of evidence for means substitution. A 2001 study conducted by Simon et al. found that 24% of those whose suicide attempts were near-fatal reported deciding to commit suicide less than five minutes before their attempt and 85% decided less than a day in advance (Simon OR et al. 2001, 52). Simon et al. observe that those who commit impulsive suicide often report that they did not expect to die but rather it was an act of desperation or a cry for help (Ibid, 55). Unfortunately, if the person chooses a gun, whether or not they thought they would die is rendered obsolete because of the consistent lethality of guns.

Predicting suicide attempts is difficult because the time between the catalyst and the attempt is often alarmingly short. However, the good news is that according to David Hemenway’s research, the

Director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center, only 10-15% of those who attempt suicide actually possess “an unbreakable desire to kill themselves” (Hemenway 2011, 504). Only 10% of suicide survivors will succeed in a subsequent attempt (Hemenway 2011, 504) and 70% will not try again (“Attempters’ Longterm Survival” 2015). These statistics show that if the person’s initial attempt at suicide can be thwarted or delayed, the likelihood of them succeeding is much reduced.

However, even if the individual, prevented from committing firearm suicide, used a different method, she would have a greater chance of survival. The Harvard School of Public Health reports that while firearms suicides only account for approximately 18% of all suicides attempts both fatal and nonfatal in the U.S., firearm suicides account for over 55% of fatal suicides because firearm suicide attempts are successful 85% of the time (“Lethality of Suicide Method” 2015). In comparison, poisoning/overdose account for 62% of all suicide attempts but only 17% of fatal suicides because suicides attempts by poisoning or overdose are only successful 2% of the time (Ibid). Means matter. Firearm suicide is the most consistently lethal method. Therefore, access to guns also matters. Researchers Betz from the University of Colorado and Barber and Miller from Harvard University found that the presence of a gun in the house increased the likelihood of the individual planning suicide with a gun sevenfold (Betz, Barber, and Miller 2011, 388). This research gives hope that means removal programs could be effective in preventing firearm suicide.

Currently, the accessibility of firearms to children is especially alarming. This October, three-year old Eian was killed by his six-year old brother in a game of cops and robbers with their father’s gun. Their father, a former gang member, kept an unlocked, loaded gun above the refrigerator for protection (“Chicago Boy Accidentally Shoots Brother - CNN.com” 2015). While this case was not suicide, it does tragically underscore the state of gun storage safety in the U.S. According to Children’s Safety Network, 2.6 million children under the age of 18 or 12% of children nationwide, live in homes where firearms are stored unlocked alongside ammunition (“Firearm Access Is a Risk Factor for Suicide” 2015).

82% of firearm suicides in the seventeen and under demographic are committed with a family member’s gun (“Youth Access to Firearms” 2015). People cherish their guns’ ability to protect them and yet statistics show that for every time a person uses a gun in self-defense in their home, thirty-seven other people use their household gun to commit suicide (Brent et al. 2013, 334).

Statistics like these demand a response. Firearm reduction is the most obvious solution. Miller, using data from the CDC from 1981 to 2002, tracked a positive correlation between decrease in gun ownership and suicide rates even when controlling for age, unemployment, per capita alcohol consumption, poverty levels and regions of the country. Miller found that a 10% drop in firearm prevalence corresponded with 4.2% drop in firearm suicide specifically and 2.5% of all suicides (Miller et al. 2006, 180). The correlation emerged even stronger among the 0 to 19 demographic. Among this demographic a 10% decrease in firearms resulted in an 8.3% drop in firearm suicide and 4.1% in suicide overall (Miller et al. 2006, 180). Results like these make one hopeful that firearm reduction through education and awareness programs like the Arizona program could make a difference in firearm suicide rates especially among adolescents.

Critics of the Arizona program would undoubtedly object that the solution is too small considering the magnitude of the problem, stating that the issue should be raised at the government level not the local level. However, any dramatic formal firearm reduction plan to prevent firearm suicides is unlikely to succeed thanks to the political weight of the NRA. The NRA lobby successfully stopped legislation requiring universal background checks in 2013 after the Sandy Hook shooting despite the fact that a reported 90% of Americans supported the bill (Donohue 2015). Furthermore, the NRA is unlikely to take action against firearm suicide as their website already admits the connection between owning firearms and committing suicide explaining it as “Gun owners are notably self-reliant and exhibit a willingness to take definitive action...Such action may include ending their own life when the time is deemed appropriate” (“NRA-ILA | Suicide And Firearms” 2015b). Suicide is treated as noble decision

not a tragedy. Considering the lobby's current strength, it is unlikely that Congress could pass any major firearm safety or reduction bill.

The courts are a more likely harbinger of major change but still not a sure bet. The last two Supreme Court cases involving gun control upheld citizens' constitutional right to carry firearms for the purpose of self-defense. *District of Columbia v. Heller* upheld this as a federal right and *McDonald v. Chicago* upheld it as a state right ("District of Columbia v. Heller 554 U.S. 570 (2008)" 2015; "McDonald v. Chicago 561 U.S. ____ (2010)" 2015). However, both cases were decided by a five to four majority with the dissenting opinions defining the right to bear arms as only applying to militias (Ibid). Therefore, if the composition of the court was to change, conceivably these decision could be overturned.

Obama's continued appeals for stronger gun control have proved largely ineffective therefore he is considering writing an executive order compelling gun salespersons who sell a certain number of guns to require their customers to pass background checks. However, the arbitrary assignment of a threshold will make the executive order difficult to justify in courts (Eilperin 2015). Evidently, none of the three government branches are currently able to institute large-scale change. Thus smaller more community based solutions like the Arizona program offer a greater hope for change as a first step. Hopefully small scale success will open the door for larger, cooperative efforts.

Navigating the minefield of the gun control debate is daunting because both sides are deeply entrenched. However, the tragedy and senselessness of firearm suicide can be rallying cry for change on both sides of the debate. Demicco, a gun shop owner in New Hampshire, sold a gun to someone who hours later used it to commit suicide. Afterwards, Demicco said "As a business person, having a customer do it – it's just an ugly, ugly thing. I decided I must become involved [in prevention efforts]." Demicco now works to spread awareness about firearm suicide among his fellow gun shop owners ("Gun Shop Project" 2015). He has not given up his guns but his brush with firearm suicide made him more sensitive to the risks and open to cooperative solutions. The goal is not to take away people's guns or constitutional rights but

rather to reduce the accessibility of a highly lethal means of committing suicide so that more people seek help before it is too late.

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