

The Need for Stronger Gun Control Essay

Introduction

In the US, the debate over gun control has weakened over the years, but was stirred by series of episodes including mass killings during random shooting by gunmen in civilian settings. In December 2012, a man took lives of 20 innocent children in a mass shooting with two semiautomatic guns at an elementary school in Connecticut, US. This tragic incident shook the whole world awaking a long lasting gun-control debate again (Ghobashy & Barrett, 2012). It prompted the administration of President Obama to take some firm actions to control the availability of military weapons. In January 2013, the US President Barack Obama proposed a gun control bill to prevent violent use of guns, which implied a total ban on weapons and large capacity magazines of ammunition, improved background check systems, and stricter trafficking laws. A big number of people believe that restriction of gun purchase or strict gun-control laws can be an effective solution to a gun violence problem. However, regardless of massive public support, the bill was rejected by the Senate in April, 2013. Gun ownership in the US far surpasses other countries, which makes the US rank first in firearms per capita in the world (“11 Facts about guns”, 2012). Such high gun ownership has played an important role in increasing gun violence, crime rates, homicides, and suicides in the US. Many studies, surveys, and official reports have confirmed that though gun control cannot curb overall violence rate, it is an effective solution to reduce gun violence rate in the country. Current essay analyzes the effectiveness of gun control and necessity of stronger gun control laws for reducing gun violence in the US. By relying on various statistics, and scholarly reports, current paper tries to present the impact of gun control policies on gun violence rate in the country.

Prevalence

Almost 40 to 45% of American families possess guns in their homes. According to the survey by the Harvard School of Public health, it is the highest rate of gun ownership among developed countries in the world. Nearly one third of American adults own some type of firearm. Around 60% of Republican voters confessed in Election Day poll of 2008 that they had a gun in their homes. Among the Democrats, the statistic was 25%. Though gun ownership rates have declined since 1960s, the most significant decline has been recorded among the Democrats (“Guns, violence, and gun control”, 2013).

According to the reports of Mayors Against Illegal Guns, an association of more than 1,000 US mayors, there have been 93 mass shootings in 35 states since January 2009 to September 2013. The 35-page report, which is based on FBI and media data, further stated that assault weapons were used in 14 of the 93 shootings, resulting in an average of 63% more deaths (Moya-Smith, 2013). In 2011, the number of people killed with guns was 32,163, including 15,953 homicides, 19,766 suicides, and 851 unintended gun deaths. The number of homicides using military style firearms was 679 in 2011 (Alpers, Rossetti, Wilson, & Royet, 2013). Reports suggest that almost four times more African-American males die due to gun violence compared to white males. The highest rate of gun violence is among 15-24 year olds. Majority of gun homicides, i.e., 79%, involve handguns, and in most cases such gun accidents are assaults without any purpose of theft, robbery, or rape. The number of people becoming victims of gun violence is increasing by almost 200,000 each year. A study about gun-related deaths in 23 developed nations carried out in the year 2003 showed that 80% of deaths occurred in the US, even though other countries had a combined population almost twice than of the US (“Guns, violence, and gun control”, 2013).

Firearm Laws

Guns in the US are regulated by the state, local, and federal authorities. The laws and regulations of guns in the US can be characterized as permissive. Second Amendment was adopted in 1791, which stated, “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed”. Though Second Amendment protects the right to carry firearms, considering the situation of the 18th century, there was necessity to carry weapons to protect families, and civilians from the violence of colonial war. From historical context, Second Amendment was an important law, however, in current scenario, it cannot be justified and need to terminate. In 1934, National Firearms Act imposed a legal excise tax on the transfer and manufacture of certain firearms, and mandated the registration of it. According to the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, a new National Instant Criminal Background Check System, run by the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), was imposed, restraining illegal and unlicensed purchase of firearms. In 1994, “Assault Weapons Ban” bill prohibited the manufacture, ownership, and importation of military style semiautomatic assault weapons and large-capacity ammunition feeding devices for civilian use (Gettings & McNiff, 2013).

Correlation between Guns and Gun Violence

Many opponents of gun control deny a relation between guns and crime. One of the leading opponents, Zach Fulkerson, criticizes gun control in his recent article “Gun Control 2013: Guns and Crime is a False Correlation” by providing statistics from the research work of Dr. John Lott. However, in 2005, the National Research Council, including experts like James Q. Wilson, Charles Wellford, Joel Waldfogel, Steven Levitt, and Joel Horowitz, published a wide-ranging report that concluded that the data and facts provided in Lott’s research were not reliable and had numerous flaws. Although gun control laws may not be

efficient enough to curb overall crimes, it can effectively restrain crimes related to the use of guns. Guns and gun violence go hand in hand, and various facts and figures have convincingly proved it (McElwee, 2013).

Figure 1: A Graph of Rate of Suicide and Proportion of Houses Owning Fire Arms
(McElwee, 2013)

Reports of Public Health in 2006 found that the number of firearm suicides in the US decreased simultaneously with the number of households owning guns. This finding shows a well-established relationship between the availability of guns at home and the risk of suicide attempts. Also, the research by Mark Dugan shows a positive change in homicide rate with the decreased gun ownership in the society (McElwee, 2013).

Correlation between High Levels of Gun Violence and Weak Gun Laws

Many factors significantly influence the rate of gun violence in any society. In the US, though the federal law governs few aspects of firearm regulations such as licensing and monitoring of certain categories of firearm ownership, most of the policies related to gun laws and regulations are created by each state. As a result, different states have different approaches to gun control, gun sales, licensing, and gun carrying laws. Recently, the Center for American Progress studied gun ownership laws in 50 states and observed the impact of the adopted laws and policies on each state's crime rate (Gerney, Parsons, & Posner, 2013).

Figure 2: A Graph of Correlation between State Gun Laws and Gun-Violence Outcomes
(Gerney, Parsons, & Posner, 2013)

The graph above shows that gun laws and gun-violence outcomes are directly proportional to each other. The states with the strictest gun laws have the lowest gun-violence crime rates, while the states with the weakest gun laws show higher rates of gun-violence

crimes. According to this report, states like South Dakota, Arizona, and Mississippi, where gun laws are weak, are among the top three states of the US that have the highest rates of gun-violence in the country. On the other hand, the states like California, New Jersey, and Massachusetts where gun laws are strict, are among the top three states with the lowest rates of gun-violence in the country. In a way, these results show that effective gun laws and restrictions on gun ownership can be useful measures to control gun violence in the country (Gerney, Parsons, & Posner, 2013).

Correlation between Gun Violence and Mental Health

Mental health is one of the serious issues in modern America. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 26.2% of adults in the US live with some kind of mental illness varying from depression to Schizophrenia and PTSD. Such patients often carry a danger in some way to people around them. The reports of Mayors Against Illegal Guns have strengthened this fact, which stated that, in ten cases of mass shootings, mental illness was identified in the shooter. In 40 of the incidents, the shooter committed suicide after the killings. There are serious issues with screening and access to care for mental illness in the US. Though some of the offenders receive a screening after a crime, some sort of damage has already been done (Kee, 2013).

Besides mental illness, violent video games and media contents are stimulating disturbing violent behavior among the users. Research evidences that have been collected during the past few decades constantly warn about the risk of increased violent behavior in youth and adults who are consistently exposed to violence by means of television, news, movies, and video games. Various psychological theories explain the long-term and short-term effects of media violence on an individual. According to these theories, continuous exposure to violence in entertainment and the mass media stimulates specific kinds of

aggressive behavior in the viewers; they become less sensitive to the suffering and pain of others; also, they are more prone to psychological disorders, which stimulate criminal behavior in them (Huesmann, 2007, pp. 7-11).

Effect of Gun Control on Various Societies

According to the reports, countries like Australia, England, Norway, India, and Canada have adopted strict gun control laws, which have remarkably affected the rate of gun violence in these societies. Homicide rate per 100,000 people in these countries is too low compared to the one in the US. Similarly to the US, none of European societies has been able to avoid mass shooting incidents. However, unlike the US, most countries have made their gun laws more strict due to which the rate of gun violence has dropped significantly (Squires, 2013). The US (10.2 per 100,000 population) and South Africa (9.4 per 100,000 population) have extremely high number of firearm-related deaths, whereas countries like Japan and the UK, where gun laws are strict, have extremely low rates of firearm-related deaths, which is 0.06 per 100,000, and 0.25 per 100,000, respectively (Boseley, 2013).

Future Gun Control Policies

Various facts and statistics have proved that gun control leads to reduction in gun violence. Gun violence is a major issue in the US, which is continuously threatening stability and peace in a society. Various countries have adopted strict gun control laws and due to it they have managed to control gun-related crimes in their regions. Though the US Federal Government has presented gun control laws, they have various flaws and limitations that need to be improved.

On September, 2013, Democrats Angela Giron and John Morse demonstrated their support for recently enacted gun-control laws that mandate background checks on private gun sales and restrict magazine clips to 15 rounds. Though, President Obama's proposals to tighten gun-control laws were rejected by the Senate, it is gaining massive support from the citizens. His future policy plan for gun-control includes universal background checks for gun sales, limiting magazines to a 10-round capacity, strengthening law and enforcement against gun violence and trafficking, imposing strict ban on assault weapons, and ending the prohibition on gun violence research (Gettings & McNiff, 2013).

Conclusion

Though, there are many factors associated with a gun-violence issue in the country, various scholarly research and expert studies have proved a direct relationship between the high gun ownership and increased gun violence. The research shows that when easy access for guns is restricted by strict gun control policies, gun-related violence is significantly reduced. Also, the issue of increasing media violence cannot be ignored. In order to control violent behavior among people, it is necessary to take strong actions against growing media violence.

Gun control leads to a reduction in gun violence. Therefore, it is important for the US government to promote stronger gun control policies and strengthen law enforcement in order to reduce massive gun-violence rate in the country and create peaceful society.

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