

## Why Gun 'Control' Is Not Enough

By Jeff McMahan, Professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University  
19 December, 2012

*In the wake of the school massacre in Newtown, Conn., and the resulting renewed debate on gun control in the United States, The Stone will publish a series of essays this week that examine the ethical, social and humanitarian implications of the use, possession and regulation of weapons. Other articles in the series can be found [here](#).*

Americans are finally beginning to have a serious discussion about guns. One argument we're hearing is the central pillar of the case for private gun ownership: that we are all safer when more individuals have guns because armed citizens deter crime and can defend themselves and others against it when deterrence fails. Those who don't have guns, it's said, are free riders on those who do, as the criminally disposed are less likely to engage in crime the more likely it is that their victim will be armed.

When most citizens are armed, as they were in the Wild West, crime doesn't cease. The criminals get better.

There's some sense to this argument, for even criminals don't like being shot. But the logic is faulty, and a close look at it leads to the conclusion that the United States should ban private gun ownership entirely, or almost entirely.

One would think that if widespread gun ownership had the robust deterrent effects that gun advocates claim it has, our country would be freer of crime than other developed societies. But it's not. When most citizens are armed, as they were in the Wild West, crime doesn't cease. Instead, criminals work to be better armed, more efficient in their use of guns ("quicker on the draw"), and readier to use them. When this happens, those who get guns may be safer than they would be without them, but those without them become progressively more vulnerable.

Gun advocates have a solution to this: the unarmed must arm themselves. But when more citizens get guns, further problems arise: people who would once have got in a fistfight instead shoot the person who provoked them; people are shot by mistake or by accident.

And with guns so plentiful, any lunatic or criminally disposed person who has a sudden and perhaps only temporary urge to kill people can simply help himself to the contents of Mom's gun cabinet. Perhaps most important, the more people there are who have guns, the less effective the police become. The power of the citizens and that of the police approach parity. The police cease to have even a near-monopoly on the use of force.

To many devotees of the Second Amendment, this is precisely the point. As former Congressman Jay Dickey, Republican of Arkansas, said in January 2011, "We have a right to bear arms because of the threat of government taking over the freedoms we have." The more people there are with guns, the less able the government is to control them. But if arming the citizenry limits the power of the government, it does so by limiting the power of its agents, such as the police. Domestic defense becomes more a matter of private self-help and vigilantism and less a matter of democratically-controlled, public law enforcement. Domestic security becomes increasingly "privatized."

There is, of course, a large element of fantasy in Dickey's claim. Individuals with handguns are no match for a modern army. It's also a delusion to suppose that the government in a liberal democracy such as the United States could become so tyrannical that armed insurrection, rather than democratic procedures, would be the best means of constraining it. This is not Syria; nor will it ever be. Shortly after Dickey made his comment, people in Egypt rose against a government that had suppressed their freedom in ways far more serious than requiring them to pay for health care. Although a tiny minority of Egyptians do own guns, the protesters would not have succeeded if those guns had been brought to Tahrir Square. If the assembled citizens had been brandishing Glocks in accordance with the script favored by Second Amendment fantasists, the old regime would almost certainly still be in power and many Egyptians who're now alive would be dead.

As more private individuals acquire guns, the power of the police declines, and personal security becomes a matter of self-help.

For the police to remain effective in a society in which most of those they must confront or arrest are armed, they must, like criminals, become better armed, more numerous, and readier to fire. But if they do that, guns won't have produced a net reduction in the power of the government but will only have generated enormous private and public expenditures, leaving the balance of power between armed citizens and the state as it was before, the unarmed conspicuously worse off, and everyone poorer except the gun industry. The alternative to maintaining the balance of power is to allow it to shift in favor of the armed citizenry and away from the police, again making unarmed citizens—including those who refuse on principle to contribute to the erosion of collective security by getting a gun—the greatest losers overall.

The logic is inexorable: as more private individuals acquire guns, the power of the police declines, personal security becomes more a matter of self-help, and the unarmed have an increasing incentive to get guns, until everyone is armed. When most citizens then have the ability to kill anyone in their vicinity in an instant, everyone is less secure than they would be if no one had guns other than the members of a democratically accountable police force.

The logic of private gun possession is thus similar to that of the nuclear arms race. When only one state gets nuclear weapons, it enhances its own security but reduces that of others, which have become more vulnerable. The other states then have an incentive to get nuclear weapons to try to restore their security. As more states get them, the incentives for others increase. If eventually all get them, the potential for catastrophe—whether through irrationality, misperception, or accident—is great. Each state's security is then much lower than it would be if none had nuclear weapons.

Gun advocates and criminals are allies in demanding that guns remain in private hands. They differ in how they want them distributed. Criminals want guns for themselves but not for their potential victims. Others want them for themselves but not for criminals. But while gun control can do a little to restrict access to guns by potential criminals, it can't do much when guns are to be found in every other household. Either criminals *and* non-criminals will have them or neither will. Gun advocates prefer for both rather than neither to have them.

But, as with nuclear weapons, we would all be safer if no one had guns — or, rather, no one other than trained and legally constrained police officers. Domestic defense would then be conducted the way we conduct national defense. We no longer accept, as the authors of the now obsolete Second Amendment did, that “a well-regulated militia” is “necessary to the security of a free state.” Rather than leaving national defense to citizens' militias, we now, for a variety of compelling reasons, cede the right of national

defense to certain state-authorized professional institutions: the Army, Navy, and so on. We rightly trust these forces to protect us from external threats and not to become instruments of domestic repression. We could have the same trust in a police force designed to protect us from domestic threats. A prohibition of private ownership would not mean that no one could shoot guns. Guns for target shooting could be rented under security arrangements at the range. And there's perhaps scope for debate about private possession of single chamber shotguns for hunting.

Gun advocates will object that a prohibition of private gun ownership is an impossibility in the United States. But this is not an objection they can press in good faith, for the only reason that a legal prohibition could be impossible in a democratic state is that a majority oppose it. If gun advocates ceased to oppose it, a prohibition would be possible.

They will next argue that even if there were a legal prohibition, it could not be enforced with anything approaching complete effectiveness. This is true. As long as some people somewhere have guns, some people here can get them. Similarly, the legal prohibition of murder cannot eliminate murder. But the prohibition of murder is more effective than a policy of "murder control" would be.

Guns are not like alcohol and drugs, both of which we have tried unsuccessfully to prohibit. Many people have an intense desire for alcohol or drugs that is independent of what other people may do. But the need for a gun for self-defense depends on whether other people have them and how effective the protection and deterrence provided by the state are. Thus, in other Western countries in which there are fewer guns, there are correspondingly fewer instances in which people need guns for effective self-defense.

Gun advocates sometimes argue that a prohibition would violate individuals' rights of self-defense. Imposing a ban on guns, they argue, would be tantamount to taking a person's gun from her just as someone is about to kill her. But this is a defective analogy. Although a prohibition would deprive people of one effective means of self-defense, it would also ensure that there would be far fewer occasions on which a gun would be necessary or even useful for self-defense. For guns would be forbidden not just to those who would use them for defense but also to those who would use them for aggression. Guns are only one means of self-defense and self-defense is only one means of achieving security against attack. It is the right to security against attack that is fundamental. A policy that unavoidably deprives a person of one means of self-defense but on balance substantially reduces her vulnerability to attack is therefore respectful of the more fundamental right from which the right of self-defense is derived.

In other Western countries, per capita homicide rates, as well as rates of violent crime involving guns, are a fraction of what they are in the United States. The possible explanations of this are limited. Gun advocates claim it has nothing to do with our permissive gun laws or our customs and practices involving guns. If they are right, should we conclude that Americans are simply inherently more violent, more disposed to mental derangement, and less moral than people in other Western countries? If you resist that conclusion, you have little choice but to accept that our easy access to all manner of firearms is a large part of the explanation of why we kill each other at a much higher rate than our counterparts elsewhere. Gun advocates must search their consciences to determine whether they really want to share responsibility for the perpetuation of policies that make our country the homicide capitol of the developed world.

[http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/19/why-gun-control-is-not-enough/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/19/why-gun-control-is-not-enough/?_r=0)