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Outlier Nation: Homicides, Incarceration, Guns and Gun Culture

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The killing of 20 children and 6 teachers at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut has shaken the nation enough so that the issue of how to combat America’s unusual level of gun violence is now on the agenda for the first time in almost two decades. In 1994, President Clinton succeeded in getting two major gun control measures: 1) a national background check program that was designed to keep guns away from felons and the mentally ill, and 2) a ban on the type of “assault weapons” used by Adam Lanza, the Newtown shooter. Unfortunately, the National Rifle Association (NRA) – whose coffers are swelled by funds from gun manufacturers – ultimately was able to undermine both of these initiatives.

First, NRA efforts helped to gut the background check program by allowing all private sales to be conducted without a background check. This loophole was designed to keep gun sales flowing since gun manufacturers are happy to make sales regardless of who the buyer is. Indeed, a key selling point in gun ads is that the public needs to have powerful weapons to confront the armed criminals, so there is clearly a profit in keeping the bad guys armed to the teeth.

Second, the NRA managed to get a ten-year limitation put on the assault weapons ban so that the law would lapse unless Congress once again voted to restore it. The result: the assault weapons ban ended in 2004 when President George Bush withdrew the support for the ban that he had endorsed while running for President in 2000.

Indeed, perhaps the worst aspect of the Clinton gun initiatives is that the NRA mounted opposition to Democratic candidate Al Gore in 2000, which enabled George Bush to become President by narrowly defeating Al Gore in his home state of Tennessee. Since Bush is now widely regarded in the US and around the world as having presided over an array of ill-advised military actions and bad policies that brought the world economy to the brink of collapse, it is not too much to suggest that the entire world suffered in part because of NRA and Republican efforts to punish Democrats for backing gun control in the 1990s. In addition to rewarding the NRA by helping to eliminate the assault weapons ban, George Bush also appointed right-wing Supreme Court Justices who in 2008 with a 5-4 decision helped create for the first time in the nation’s history a private constitutional right to keep and bear arms.

The gun industry has followed many of the tactics that the tobacco industry employed to fight regulation of cigarettes: both industries have put forth erroneous and misleading information while attacking and suppressing accurate information. The NRA even claims that our gun culture and gun saturated society has on balance increased our safety. But the evidence is clear that we have paid and continue to pay a very high price in lives and devastating injuries because of our uniquely indulged obsession with guns.

The gun lobby would have you believe that the US is in the middle of the pack when it comes to homicidal violence. That’s true if our “pack” should include poor countries with unstable governments. Countries vary a great deal in their level of homicidal violence, but there is a strong statistical tendency for the homicide rate to decline as per capita income rises. Figure 1 plots United Nations data on the
2008 homicide rates and per capita income of 102 countries with at least 5 million residents. The strong downward trend indicated by the regression line shows that that richer countries on average are better able to shield their citizens from lethal violence. Indeed, the graph shows that once a country reaches the level of wealth of at least Poland (a bit under $14,000 in per capita income), homicidal violence has been substantially reduced.

But note that among the 26 countries that fall into this richest category there is one outlier that sits far above the regression line, meaning that it has far greater homicidal violence than one would expect given its wealth. Of course, that country is the United States (with per capita income of roughly $47,000). The regression line tells us that one might expect a country as rich as the US to have a murder rate of around 1.59 per 100,000. In fact, our homicide rate of 5.4 is more than three times as high.

Figure 2 provides a similar graph but now showing firearm homicides across 41 countries. Once again, the Figure shows that the US is an enormous outlier having a gun death rate (3.6 per 100,000) more than 10 times the rate of what you would expect from such a rich nation (0.31 per 100,000).

The bleak story of the US as the sole affluent outlier nation in homicidal violence is even worse than the figures suggest for two reasons. First, since so many of our murders come from guns, the fatality count understates the level of social harm: gun violence leaves behind more damaged survivors living with brain damage and paralysis than non-gun homicides. Second, while the rich nations have generally tended to have incarceration rates in the neighborhood of 100 per 100,000 (and indeed the US had traditionally incarcerated at that level until the unprecedented upturn in prison building over the last thirty-five years), we have suppressed crime by incarcerating at more than 7 times the rate of our competitor nations. If we had followed the approach of our competitor nations and retained our previous level of incarceration, the US overall homicide rate would be in the neighborhood of 8 to 9 per 100,000 (based on standard estimates of the impact of incarceration on crime) instead of its current level of 5.4. In other words, the graphs underestimate the extent of our extreme outlier status.

Of course, many other factors influence crime rates for a nation from religion to demographics to drug and alcohol consumption to policing, but none of these factors can explain the large outlier status of the US, either because the factors are not powerful influences on crime or because we are not worse than most other affluent countries in those dimensions. There are three factors that likely promote gun and non-gun homicidal violence in which we are somewhat worse than our competitors: we have greater instability in our child-rearing families, higher levels of poverty overall and for children, and we fight a more intense war on drugs which fuels much gang violence that would dissipate under a different legal regime.

But these factors alone do not explain the enormous gap in violence that separates us from our competitor nations. What exacerbates all of these criminogenic factors is our position, without parallel among affluent nations, as a country characterized by a gun-culture-fueled abundance of easily available and high-powered weaponry. With roughly 5 percent of the world’s population, the US has 40 percent of the world’s guns in private hands. This gun-driven exceptionalism clearly considerably raises the
social costs of gun violence that result from our higher levels of family instability and poverty, and our
more intense war on drugs.

As the US sits atop its perch as the most homicidal affluence nation whose outlier status is kept from
being yet more extreme by our unprecedented levels of incarceration, it is worth reflecting on the fact
that other affluent nations have uniformly turned away from the gun culture and easy access to firearms
and in so doing enjoy levels of homicidal violence that would seem to be nirvana to us. Yet the NRA
crowd tells us that more guns lead to less crime. In other words, their claim is that had we not had the
benefit of our close to 300 million guns for our population of 300 million, our homicidal violence would
be worse still. In other words, they are implicitly asserting that our outlier gun status is like our outlier
incarceration rate and they are both suppressing the mayhem that would otherwise exist without these
extreme American attributes. If true, it would mean that our actual homicide rate (5.4) would not only
need to be ratcheted up to 8 or 9 to reflect the effect of suppressing effect of incarceration but still
further to reflect the yet higher value implied by the suppressing effect of all those life-saving guns.

But is it likely that Americans are naturally ten or more times more homicidal than the citizens of the
fourteen countries with per capita GDP greater than $36,000 who collectively have a homicide rate of
1.19? It utterly strains credulity to believe that our unique form of gun saturation has not made our
homicide problem worse. Our competitor nations have rejected that route and enjoy far greater
freedom from homicidal violence. New York, the state and the city that has been most anti-gun in its
policies, has enjoyed a record of falling homicides heralded across the globe as a crime miracle.

The gun industry sales pitch that everyone needs a gun for protection – a claim that somehow appealed
to Nancy Lanza while inflicting so much misery on her family and her townsfolk and the nation – has the
ring of veracity of early tobacco company claims that smoking would be good for your health. The
conservative, Republican, gun-owing former Chief Justice of the United States Warren Burger stated in
1991, the Second Amendment “has been the subject of one of the greatest pieces of fraud—I repeat the
word ‘fraud’—on the American public by special interest groups that I have ever seen in my lifetime.”

The great political question now is whether constitutional impediments and NRA power will keep the US
trapped in its current sub-optimal homicidal outlier status. President Obama has proposed a series of
relatively moderate proposals such as reinstating the lapsed assault weapons ban, which included an
important ban on high-capacity magazines that allowed 30 or more bullets to be fired rapidly without
re-loading. Obama has also called for universal background checks to eliminate the enormous loophole
for private sales under current law. But note that while the assault weapons ban would cover the guns
used in Newtown (and many other recent mass shootings), the background check would not have
helped because Nancy Lanza legally purchased the guns that her son used in his homicidal rampage.

Importantly, the assault weapons ban of 1994-2004 did not ban assault weapons but only prohibited
new assault weapons to be manufactured and sold. Even if Obama’s new proposed ban on assault
weapons were to pass – which seems unlikely to me given Republican control of the House of
Representatives – these weapons have been so popular since the ban lapsed in 2004 that roughly 3.5
million assault weapons will remain in circulation in any event.
Other countries have responded to mass shootings with greater resolve. In this regard, consider what happened in Australia after a crazed gunman killed 35 people in Port Arthur, Tasmania in 1996. The Australian federal government persuaded all states and territories to implement tough new gun control laws. Under the National Firearms Agreement (NFA), firearms legislation was tightened throughout the country, national registration of guns was imposed, and it became illegal to hold certain long guns that might be used in mass shootings. The gun ban was backed up by a mandatory buy-back program that substantially reduced gun possession in Australia. The effect was that both gun suicides and homicides (as well as total suicides and homicides) fell. Importantly, while there were 13 mass shootings in Australia during the period 1979–96, there have been none in the sixteen years since. A key difference may be that there was no domestic gun manufacturing industry in Australia to block legislation as there clearly is in the US.

The most likely legislative response to Newtown will be the passage of a universal background check requirement, which will make it harder to obtain guns for many felons and individuals who are barred by law from possessing guns because of their youth, drug usage, or mental illness. This will still not deal with the enormous numbers of guns that are stolen in the US – with estimates ranging from .5 to 1 million stolen guns every year.

One might wonder how so many guns get stolen, but the answer is rather simple. Since almost half of American households now own guns, burglars simply have to wait until they see a family leave for work in the morning and then go in and help themselves to the guns that are quite likely to be there (especially in the high gun-ownership states). Since there were an average of 3.7 million household burglaries each year from 2003 to 2007, and we know burglars love to walk off with guns, the high prevalence of guns in the hands of “law-abiding citizens” keeps the criminals well-stocked with much firepower.

Indeed, it is the high rate of household burglaries, which led to roughly 20,000 rapes, almost 60,000 robberies, and over 40,000 aggravated assaults in one’s own home that drives a great deal of concern that guns are needed for protection. But note that these are not unusually high levels of crime for rich nations. For example, the US has roughly comparable auto theft rates as in England and somewhat lower levels of robbery. The US does not in general have more criminals than our competitor nations (at least not more criminals out on the streets given our much higher rates of incarceration), but it has many more who are willing and able to pull a trigger.

Thus, the irony of the US situation is that those who seek to acquire guns for protection end up arming the criminals and keeping the homicide rate high. Other rich countries have imposed much stricter control of guns, and have therefore managed to greatly limit deadly criminal violence. In 2010 – the most recent year for which data is available – there were 31,672 firearm deaths in the United States. Of those, 19,392 were suicides, 11,078 were homicides and 606 died (and 14,000 were injured) in gun accidents.1 The US needs to do more to try to reduce this enormously high death toll.

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Firearm Homicide Rate vs GDP

Based on 41 countries in 2008

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\ln(\text{Firearm HR}) = 3.6 - 0.4 \times \ln(\text{GDP per capita})
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*p-value = 0.010 (Source: World Bank)*

Actual US Firearm Homicide Rate = 3.62
Predicted US Firearm Homicide Rate = 0.31