

# AARP on Gun Control

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## GUN CONTROL

Every year, more than two thousand people die in the United States from gun-related injuries. The population groups most affected by these avoidable deaths are children and young adolescents. The misuse of firearms is a problem worldwide, of course. However, the incidence of firearm use does vary from country to country. According to the *United Nations Report on Firearm Regulation, Crime Prevention, and Criminal Justice* (1997), the United States has "weaker firearm regulations and higher numbers of deaths involving firearms than all other industrialised—and even most developing —nations." The study also noted that the total firearm death rate in the United States in 1995 was 13.7 per 100,000 people, "three times the average rate among other responding countries and the third highest, after Brazil and Jamaica."

More than half the homes in the United States possess firearms, so it is hardly surprising that they rank among the "ten leading causes of death ... accounting for more than 30,000 deaths annually" (Wintermute 1987, p. 3107). While most people have guns primarily for sporting activities, many owners also have them for personal protection and security purposes.

The public health approach to violence prevention attempts not only to reduce the occurrence of [violence](#), but also to limit the numbers of fatal and nonfatal injuries when such events occur. To prevent gun-related violence, indeed any type of violence, it is important to understand the dynamics of violence as well as the role of different kinds of weapons in both fatal and nonfatal injuries. Research from around the world indicates that sociostructural factors such as high unemployment rates, ethnic and religious hostilities, political instability, financial inequalities, lack of resources, and economic deprivation increase the likelihood of violence. When guns are readily available in such settings, or where legislation to curb their illegitimate use is lax or inappropriate, injuries are more likely to occur, intentional or otherwise. Individual factors can also precipitate violence, including the use of firearms. Substance and [alcohol abuse](#), [mental disorders](#), feelings of personal inadequacy and social isolation, and an individual's experience with violence in the home are among some of the factors that have been associated with violence. One thing is certain: The more guns there are in circulation, the greater the likelihood that they will be misused. Hence, from a public health perspective, it is important to devise strategies which aim to ensure that those in possession of arms use them for legitimate purposes and not for violent or criminal acts.

There are a variety of ways of dealing with the problems caused by guns in society, and legislation is one of the methods most commonly used. Franklin Zimring has noted that laws that regulate gun use fall into three categories: those that limit the place and the manner of firearm

use, those that keep guns out of the hands of high-risk users, and those that ban high risk firearms. Place and manner legislation sets out to do as it suggests, to limit certain uses of firearms in certain locations. Examples include banning the use of firearms in public places and [prohibiting](#) the carrying of a firearm (except for those carried by security personnel and police). This legislation is difficult to implement, however, without the active support of the police force, and that support requires additional funding to make sure that police monitor potentially violent events.

Successful place and manner legislation has been implemented in the country of Columbia, where firearms are involved in 80 percent of homicides. Here, an innovative gun control [intervention](#) was implemented by the Program for Development, Security, and Peace (DESEPAZ), in collaboration with the Mayor of Cali, Colombia's third largest city. A police-enforced ban was introduced in Cali that prohibited carrying firearms on weekends, public paydays, public holidays, and election days because "such [periods](#) were historically associated with higher rates of homicide" (Villaveces 2000, p. 1206). Media-led information campaigns informed the public of the new gun control measure. On the days when the ban was in operation, police set up strategically located checkpoints in areas of the city where criminal activities were commonplace, and they conducted random searches of individuals. "During the ban, police policy directed that if a legally acquired firearm was found on an individual, the weapon was to be temporarily taken from the individual and the individual fined. Individuals without proof of legally acquiring the firearm were to be arrested and the firearm permanently confiscated" (Villaveces, p. 1206). The aggressive intervention program operated in Cali during 1993 and 1994. A similar intervention was applied in Bogota from 1995 to 1997. The researchers studying the preventive effects of these measures reported that the "rate of homicide (in Cali) was 14 percent lower than expected during periods when the ban on carrying firearms was in effect" while it was "13 percent lower than expected (in Bogota) during intervention periods" (Villaveces, p. 1209). Whether such a program would work in areas where homicide rates are not as high is debatable. However, the researchers of this study suggest that this initiative could be replicated in places where similar conditions exist.

Denying high-risk users access to firearms is the second type of legislative tool to control gun misuse. In order for this approach to work, the law has to define clearly who falls into the category of "high-risk user." The term is usually applied to convicted criminals, those deemed "mentally unfit," and to drug addicts. It also applies to minors. Such legislation attempts to make it difficult for members of these groups to possess a firearm.

Every year, in developed and developing countries across the globe, thousands of children and young adolescents die while playing with loaded guns. Additionally, studies have shown that adolescents are vulnerable in terms of firearm misuse and successful suicide attempts. In the United States between 1965 and 1985 "the rate of [suicide](#) involving firearms increased 36 percent, whereas the rate of suicide involving other methods remained constant. Among adolescents and young adults, rates of suicide by firearms doubled during the same period" (Kellermann 1992, p. 467). Restricting the access minors have to weapons can help to reduce these events. Many states now attempt to prevent high-risk groups from obtaining firearms by identifying "ineligible" individuals before they can acquire a gun. Minors would obviously fall into this category. "The [screening](#) system included in U.S. legislation known as the Brady Bill

permits police to determine whether a prospective gun purchaser has a criminal record. If the check turns up nothing ... the purchaser can obtain the gun" (Zimring 1991, p. 53).

There are limitations to legislation that denies high-risk users access to firearms. Again, this kind of a law is difficult to enforce because it needs continuous police surveillance and relies heavily on the "ineligible person" actually being caught in possession of a firearm. It assumes that the potential outcome of being caught and punished will dissuade such persons from obtaining firearms. Moreover, there will always be alternative ways of obtaining a weapon, whether it be through the black market, theft, or getting another person to purchase the weapon. Screening systems also carry a cost and imply delays. However, even with these limitations, such legislation is a step in the right direction, as it can help to ensure that firearms are not sold directly to convicted felons or to minors. To overcome some of these difficulties, many states now require gun owners to register their weapons. However, many crimes are committed with stolen weapons that are used by someone other than the registered legal owner.

The third legislative strategy used to combat the misuse of firearms is to introduce legislation regulating the use of very dangerous weapons. Such "laws ... limit the supply of high risk weapons" and "can complement the strategy of decreasing high risk uses and users" (Zimring, p. 53). Such supply reduction laws "strive to make the most dangerous guns so scarce that potential criminals cannot obtain them easily" (Zimring, p. 52). They also set out rigid requirements that must be met to prove that possession of such a weapon is necessary. Sawed-off shotguns, machine guns, and certain military devices are the kinds of weapons covered by this type of legislation. Research into this area in the United States has shown that states in which such strict laws operate have lower levels of violent crime than states that do not.

Another means of legislating for firearm misuse is to introduce stiff penalties for criminals caught using firearms. "More than half of the states in the USA have passed such laws. This approach is popular with gun owners because the penalties concern only gun related crime and place no restrictions on firearm ownership" (Zimring, p. 52).

Attempting to legislate for the complex realities of gun-related violence is a daunting task. The ideal gun control measure would be one that would "prevent all crime and violence involving guns without interfering with their legitimate use in contemporary life." In reality, the best we are likely to achieve is to reduce the problems caused by the illegitimate use of firearms while "minimizing the restraints on the legitimate uses of guns" (Zimring, p. 52). The strategy, or combination of strategies, employed in any given context will depend on the nature and severity of the problem.

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