

Discussion of Why Collecting Data on Gun Violence is So Hard

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Abstract

This is a discussion of the three papers in the invited session on “Collecting Data on Gun Violence: Why Is It So Hard, and What Are We Missing?” sponsored by the Committee on Scientific Freedom and Human Rights. The three papers together consider the limited amount of federal funding available to support firearm injury research and the difficulties in obtaining data necessary to carry out firearm injury studies. The discussion reviews issues common to the papers, especially the role of the National Rifle Association in discouraging firearm research at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The discussion suggests that the scientific community should defend the quality of firearm research when such defense is justified. This may ultimately be a more successful approach than are direct political appeals for more funding and better data. Failing to support sound research weakens the institutional basis of science itself.

Key Words: Firearm injury, research support, data availability, gun politics

1. The Issues

The papers in this session consider two different but related topics. The first topic is the difficulty of obtaining funding to support firearm injury research. The second is the lack of data necessary to conduct this research. The link between the two is the vocal opposition of firearm enthusiasts to scientific studies of gun violence.

Gun enthusiasts, principally represented by the National Rifle Association, view studies of firearm injuries as inevitably damaging to their beliefs. They accordingly use their considerable political power to eliminate financial support for firearm research and to limit use of data collections that might be helpful to this effort. In doing so, they slow or even stop progress in understanding one of the nation's major policy questions.

David Hemenway's paper outlines the scope of firearm violence in the United States and the degree to which public health research currently neglects it. He discusses how researchers can use proven methods to learn about firearm injuries and to develop effective ways of reducing them. He argues that lack of funding helps explain the meager efforts that researchers currently devote to gun-related issues.

The funding limitations that Hemenway describes are widespread and apply across government agencies and private foundations. They are particularly notable, however, at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which stopped supporting gun violence studies after the NRA convinced Congress to restrict funds for this activity. The CDC is a

logical agency to take the lead in gun-related research, and its lack of attention to the issue helps set a pattern that then holds elsewhere.

Perhaps as troubling as the absence of research support for investigating gun violence is the lack of effort to collect basic data on firearm injuries. Given the availability of adequate data, much useful research could go on without external funding. If obtaining the data requires that scholars must undertake the collection effort themselves, the unavailability of federal funds makes such studies essentially impossible. The NRA has been able not only to discourage gathering new data on firearm issues, but it has also been successful in restricting access to existing collections. These include, for example, tracing data on the ownership histories of guns involved in crimes and lists of persons who have concealed handgun licenses.

Ted Alcorn extends Hemenway's paper by documenting the decline in firearm injury publications that followed the NRA's attacks on the CDC. Alcorn shows that after a regular pattern of increases, the annual number of articles on gun violence flattened out in the mid-1990's. As a percentage of total journal articles, firearm studies also rose steadily until the mid-1990's, and then just as steadily fell. The number of active firearm researchers showed a similar pattern as well, with a period of rapid growth followed by stagnation.

The degree to which federal funding and CDC activities are responsible for these outcomes is of course somewhat uncertain. The patterns themselves are nevertheless visually clear, and they closely correspond to the major variations in attention from the CDC.

Like the authors of the other papers, Laurel Eckhouse discusses how lack of data on firearm violence can slow the development of social theory and public policy. Eckhouse's interest is in police use of force against civilians and the data that are necessary to study it. She points out that these data are largely unavailable, especially at the level of the entire nation where research would be most useful.

In fairness to the NRA, many of the problems with police violence data are due to an FBI recording system that is inadequate for reasons unrelated to gun politics. The Director of the FBI has expressed frustration with this situation, and the Bureau has announced plans to expand its data on official use of force (Adamson, 2016). This initiative will nevertheless rely on the National Incident-Based Reporting System, a data collection effort to which not all police agencies currently contribute. The new measures will therefore still not provide estimates for the entire nation, and extending other data collections, such as the CDC-supported NVDRS, would be helpful in giving additional coverage.

Studies of police violence require large-scale government recording systems to give them credibility. Eckhouse's paper shows that the need for better data on firearm injuries applies across the criminal justice system and goes beyond the activities of the CDC.

Besides increasing the difficulty of studying firearms violence, the resource limitations that the papers describe also impede research in other ways. The restrictions undermine the legitimacy of scholarship on firearm issues, for example, making these investigations contentious and discouraging researchers from undertaking them. Many interesting study

areas exist, giving little incentive to waste one's time and risk one's reputation pursuing such fraught topics.

2. What Might Be Done?

An obvious question that arises from the papers is how to change the current state of affairs. Unfortunately, I do not think that the prospects here are very encouraging. The National Rifle Association seems to have taken the view that careful studies of firearm violence will work against its goal of expanding access to guns. The best solution for the organization is then to insure absolutely no federal funds are available for research purposes.

Characterizing the NRA as singlehandedly thwarting the wishes of the American people is an oversimplification, and it misunderstands the political environment. Although it is a formidable organization, the NRA draws its power from the grassroots, and it follows its members as much as it leads them. Many gun enthusiasts have strong opinions about policy, and politicians ignore these views at their peril. This situation may change in the future, but it shows no sign of doing so now. The control gun enthusiasts exert on policy is complete enough that Congress will not vote on a bill that would restrict firearms purchases by potential terrorists (Herszenhorn and Huetteman, 2016).

Given these political pressures, it should not surprise observers that the CDC has been reluctant to study gun injuries. Presidents come and go, as do members of Congress. Vocal firearm enthusiasts, in contrast, are constant in their interests, and they have long memories. Suffering their displeasure can jeopardize an organization, and it can harm the careers of the people who work for it. Despite a Presidential Executive Order and a letter signed by 110 members of Congress, the CDC has thus not budged in its stance on funding firearm research (Frankel, 2015a, 2015b).

Attempts to persuade gun enthusiasts to drop their opposition, or to work around it, currently appear to have little chance of success. More limited efforts are nevertheless worthwhile in their own right and might ultimately be helpful in encouraging higher levels of financial support. One set of possibilities focuses on directly addressing criticisms that gun injury studies amount to political efforts aimed at restricting firearm ownership.

Gun enthusiasts often claim that most firearm research consists of low-quality, politically motivated studies that are no more trustworthy than is the pro-gun propaganda that they generate themselves. Hemenway notes that the NRA claims it will support firearm research if it satisfies the organization's definition of a balanced presentation. Implicit in the NRA position is the idea that all research on guns involves an argument, with no underlying empirical truth. If this is so, federal support for studying gun injuries necessarily falls outside the scope of science, and agency personal involved in these efforts are only advancing a political agenda. One can then easily understand the reluctance of science-oriented federal agencies and their workers to allocate funds for gun-related studies.

Yet, as the papers here suggest, firearm studies are generally of a quality that meets or exceeds the conventional standards of adequacy for social science and public health research. These studies are in fact often innovative in their design and exemplary in their execution. Unfortunately, this quality is frequently not apparent to the public or even

non-specialist academics, and criticisms of the studies go unanswered. To justify their decisions, agency personnel need support for the scientific integrity of the projects that they fund, and such support must come from sources that are external to the agencies themselves.

One way of developing this support could come from the outlets that publish the results of firearm-related research, which include some of the most prestigious journals in the world. As a routine matter, these journals could solicit third-party editorials that discuss the scientific basis of the gun-related studies that appear in them. Editorials frequently accompany articles involving firearms, but these most often focus on the policy implications of the findings rather than on the strength of the underlying research. Editorials that consider policy can be helpful to readers in understanding the larger issues that surround the articles. By ignoring the strength of the evidence that led to the publication, however, they can leave the articles open to unreasonable attacks on their quality. Focusing on the scientific basis of the studies could blunt unfounded criticisms and offer an implicit endorsement of the high standards and good judgement of the agencies that funded them.

Second, and relatedly, scientific societies might sponsor discussions of the methods that firearm studies employ. This of course opens the potential for acrimony, because scientists themselves differ in their personal views concerning the value of guns. The issue here is not the conclusions of the studies, however, but the scientific adequacy of the methods that underlie them. Discussions of methodological standards offer the possibility of supporting the judgements of funding agencies and their personnel, and they may also operate to improve research practice more broadly.

The methods that firearm studies use to generate their findings are identical to the methods that scientific studies use to address other types of research questions. To allow exaggerated or baseless criticism of these methods to pass with no comment is to agree implicitly that the methods are of questionable value. Failing to support sound but beleaguered firearm scholarship can ultimately prove harmful to other research within a discipline.

Perhaps more hyperbolically, silence about unjustified attacks on research might have effects on the institution of science itself. In her final book, the social commentator Jane Jacobs (2004) described developments that she believed could herald the coming of a new Dark Age. One of these signs was a decline in self-policing by learned societies. Jacobs was mostly concerned about professional societies protecting incompetent or unethical behavior, but a failure to defend valid practices would also qualify as a self-policing lapse. Ignoring spurious criticisms helps validate a type of mindless debate that undermines the value of scholarship and learning more generally.

These suggestions by themselves are unlikely to increase either research funding or large-scale efforts to gather additional firearm injury data. Moreover, the suggestions do not exhaust the range of possibilities for supporting the quality of firearm research, and other approaches might work as well or better. Such incremental methods nevertheless concentrate on the issues that should properly underlie decisions about research support, and they redirect attention away from political maneuvering. Restricting funding and data for firearm-related research is ultimately an attack on the operation of science. It should be in the interest of journals, professional organizations, and individual scientists to support the soundness of this research when it is justified.

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