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## The gun grabbers of January



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Emotional responses to the Sandy Hook massacre made many Americans more receptive to gun control arguments — and understandably so. But emotion is a poor basis for public policy. No matter what emotional response the events in Newtown elicit, public policy must be rational to be effective.

It is no surprise that reasonable discourse has been nowhere in evidence; the event was catastrophic. Add to this a tone-deaf response from the National Rifle Association, national media seemingly capable only of fanning the emotional flames and politicians clamoring to get out in front and “just do something” and it’s no wonder that deliberative voices were all but drowned out.

It is time now to consider the matter soberly and dispassionately.

The premise behind gun control is that it minimizes criminal gun use. Data from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System and Gallup enable us to examine this claim.

According to these sources, the rate of gun ownership has not changed in the past decade. Both in 2001 and in 2011, 41 percent of U.S. households reported owning guns. Broken down by region

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and in both years, 52 percent of households in the South, 48 percent of households in the Midwest and 29 percent of households in the East reported owning a gun.

And these data are remarkably consistent over time.

Using 2011 data, we can split the 48 states that reported crime data into two groups (Florida and Alabama do not provide data and are thus excluded) by gun ownership.

In the 24 states with the lowest gun ownership rates, 28 percent of households reported having access to a firearm versus 48 percent for the 24 states with the highest gun ownership rates. This is a very significant difference. And one might naturally expect the group with the higher ownership rates to have decidedly higher rates of gun violence as well.

So what do the gun violence statistics look like for these two sets of states?

The firearm murder rate was slightly higher in the states with higher gun ownership rates (2.9 per 100,000 population) than in the states with lower gun ownership rates (2.7 per 100,000). But the overall murder rate was almost identical (4.3 per 100,000).

This suggests that controlling guns doesn't reduce murders but, at best, causes murderers to choose different weapons. In states with lower gun ownership rates, there were more robberies at gunpoint (39.5 per 100,000 people) than there were in states with higher gun ownership rates (30.1).

From here, the story gets even more interesting.

Gun violence has been steadily decreasing for more than 30 years. According to a 2011 report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the rate of homicides (not only murders) involving firearms has been declining by almost 2 percent per year since 1980.

In 1980, there were 6.4 firearm-related homicides for every 100,000 people in the United States. By 2008 (the last year for which data are available), the rate had fallen by almost half to 3.6 — a rate not seen since the mid 1960s.

Note that homicide statistics are more comprehensive than murder statistics since homicides include intentional as well as unintentional and justified as well as unjustified killings.

What becomes clear as one looks at the data is that we had a natural and expected reaction to an act of horrific violence — we ignored the data.

The data, however, are very clear: There is no “wave of gun violence.”

In fact, there is a lot less gun violence now than in past years. There is also no relationship between readily available firearms and levels of gun violence.

Given all of this, there are but two possibilities for the wave of gun-restricting legislation being newly discussed: Legislators are either woefully misinformed, which is unforgivable, or they are using a terrible single event to justify their attempt to control the American people further — which is far worse.

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