

The True Costs of America's Gun Obsession

By German Lopez

No other country comes close to matching America's levels of gun ownership. In fact, the United States has more firearms than people.

This is an accepted reality in American politics. The two major party presidential candidates, and their running mates, are gun owners. Even Kamala Harris, the candidate who backs more restrictive gun laws, has said she supports the Second Amendment. In a recent interview with Oprah Winfrey, Ms. Harris said that if someone broke into her home, "they're getting shot."

The comment was telling: As Ms. Harris aims her message toward undecided and conservative voters, she wants to assure them that she understands how strongly many Americans feel about gun ownership.

Americans, of course, have disagreements about guns. The positive case for guns focuses on the ability for people to protect themselves and a long-held faith that an armed populace serves as a check against government tyranny. The negative side focuses on mass shootings and the fact that the United States has higher rates of gun violence than other wealthy countries. But these differences can feel exhausted after years of stalled debate.

This debate, however, is limited. It looks only at the immediate outcomes of firearms. These outcomes are obvious and severe. But living in the country with the highest rates of civilian gun ownership has other, less direct consequences, too. And America, despite or perhaps because of its passion for guns, has long ignored those consequences.

Economists have a word for such unintended consequences: "externalities." The classic example in Econ 101 is pollution. Oil and coal power much of the world (a direct benefit), but burning them also emits pollution that makes people sick and warms the planet (a negative externality). To weigh the costs and benefits of burning fossil fuels, we need to appreciate their externalities.

As I've talked to policy experts across a variety of fields, I've discovered how much the typical conversation about guns leaves out. Some of the United States' most contentious and serious problems — from drugs to the economy — involve externalities from the production, sale and ownership of firearms. We can't truly reckon with the costs of America's abundance of guns until we consider the externalities.

'Tools of Violence' South of the Border

Take, for example, an issue that has been at the forefront of this year's election: the U.S.-Mexico border.

If you look closely at illegal immigration, guns quickly come into view. Many migrants come to the United States to flee violence in their home countries. The reason they are fleeing is that criminal groups, from the biggest drug cartels in Mexico to the smallest street gangs in Honduras, are often able to carry out that violence with impunity.

How? Because they're heavily armed — to the point that they can outgun local law enforcement. And where do they get those weapons? Mostly, the United States. The country's lax laws allow smugglers to

buy weapons at gun shows or online without background checks, for example, and then ship the firearms south.

More than 67 percent of criminal guns recovered in Mexico and traced by the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in 2021 were sourced to the United States. That might even be an underestimate. The 16 percent of guns that couldn't be traced back to a country of origin might still have come from America. Most criminal guns in Central America also come from the United States, according to other A.T.F. data.

American guns “are the tools of violence,” Ieva Jusionyte, an anthropologist at Brown University who studies the U.S.-Mexico border, told me. “The U.S. is very much implicated in the violence in these countries.”

Guns also play a role in getting migrants to the border. Criminal organizations in Mexico are responsible for much of the smuggling of migrants — what is now a billion-dollar industry. The cartels and their traffickers are overwhelmingly armed with American guns.

They are also armed with American ammunition. Much of the ammunition that cartels rely on is unavailable in Mexico's legal markets, but anyone can buy a truckload in the United States without even so much as a background check. Dr. Jusionyte recalled an experience she had when she was working as a paramedic on both the American and Mexican sides. “When border agents hear a big gun battle south of the border, they know that in the next week or so there will be attempts to smuggle large amounts of ammunition that you can't get in Mexico,” she said.

There is a similar story with drugs. Cartels in Mexico produce fentanyl, methamphetamines and other substances for American consumption. Government officials have tried for decades to stop them. In 2006, Felipe Calderón, then Mexico's president, declared war on the cartels. Even after years of bloodshed, drugs kept flowing north. Annual American overdose deaths have topped 100,000 for years. The cartels are so well armed with American weapons that the Mexican military, with U.S. support, cannot stop them.

“If there were no American guns, there would be a lot less Mexican fentanyl,” said David Shirk, an expert on U.S.-Mexico relations at the University of San Diego.

Of course, guns are not the only explanations for illegal immigration and drug trafficking. Other factors, like inadequate addiction treatment in the United States and poverty abroad, play important roles. But guns supercharge these problems.

Prisons, Police and a Vicious Cycle

Drugs and illegal immigration are just two examples. Guns play a role in exacerbating many other problems that Americans — not just liberals — care about.

Incarceration and policing are among the most obvious. More guns means more murders, research shows. Murders carry some of the stiffest criminal penalties and are more likely to result in an arrest and imprisonment than other crimes. As a result, some experts draw a line between America's large number of guns and its incarceration rate, which is among the highest in the world.

Firearms are so ubiquitous in the United States that police officers are trained to expect one when responding to a call — and, often, a gun really is nearby. Compare an American officer’s mind-set with that of an officer in Japan or Britain, where firearms are extremely rare. The American officer is more likely to fear for his or her life. This cascades to broader societal consequences: A jumpy person with a gun is more likely to pull the trigger, and, indeed, studies show that gun ownership rates correlate with police shootings.

That fear can also help explain the current hiring crisis for police officers. People don’t want to start a career in a field that seems so dangerous. “This proliferation of civilian weapons makes policing much less attractive,” John Roman, a criminal justice policy expert at the University of Chicago, said. (A similar argument, he added, applies to teachers, given the proliferation of school shootings, although the on-the-job death rate for teachers is, of course, much lower than it is for police officers.)

America’s firearms also play a role in the severity of mental health issues. Every country has people struggling with mental illness, but guns make the problem worse. They are among the deadliest methods of suicide, making it more likely that people kill themselves when they try to do so. (Most gun deaths are suicides, and the United States has one of the higher suicide rates among developed countries.) People with serious mental illnesses can lash out violently, but that violence is much likelier to turn deadly with a gun.

Firearms have an economic impact, too. In 2015, more than a quarter of gun homicides happened in neighborhoods that make up just 1.5 percent of the population. That violence drives out businesses and jobs, and pushes down home values. Public services deteriorate because of the lower tax base. “How people invest in neighborhoods is very much affected by gun violence,” Yasemin Irvin-Erickson, a criminologist at George Mason University, said. Her study found that gun violence affected not just the physical but also the economic health of communities.

These problems aren’t mutually exclusive. Imagine a community suddenly plagued by high levels of gun violence. Many businesses don’t want to work there anymore, eliminating jobs and shrinking the tax base. Would-be police officers were already skeptical of working in a place with high rates of violence, and now the community can’t attract them with the promise of higher pay because tax revenue is down. Without enough officers, the community can’t fully address its high levels of gun violence. The situation deteriorates further, and even fewer businesses go into that community. A vicious cycle takes hold.

As with the border, guns are not the sole cause of all of these problems. People’s ability to build wealth is also tied to the automation of some jobs, the relocation of factories to China and racist practices like redlining. Police departments have lost public trust after high-profile, controversial killings, contributing to the hiring crisis. But many of the scholars who specialize in these issues agree: Guns are a crucial part of the picture.

An Informed Decision

It’s understandable that much of the discussion of guns focuses on their immediate consequences: the everyday murders, the mass shootings, the massacres in schools.

But looking at just the immediate consequences, as important as they are, is too narrow when we think about gun policy. Most Americans, and experts, would agree that it’s irresponsible to discuss the oil and

coal industries based solely on their direct effects: the electricity, the jobs. It would leave the public less informed not to cover the industries' emission of toxic, planet-warming gasses.

The same is true for guns. America has decided on a set of policies that makes firearms easily accessible to nearly everyone. That decision carries consequences — and we should consider all of those consequences in evaluating whether the country's policies are working.

Why haven't we? One explanation is that our political system struggles with complexity. It's easier to focus on the immediate consequences than to explain how seemingly unrelated topics are actually connected. The federal government's decades-long prohibition on using taxpayer money to fund gun research, which was partially lifted in 2018, almost certainly didn't help.

Some people will look at the full cost of guns and most likely see it as evidence of the need for stricter laws controlling their sale and distribution.

Other people — voters and lawmakers alike — will still back lax gun laws and embrace the Second Amendment. Many gun owners acknowledge that the widespread accessibility of firearms probably leads to more violence. Still, they believe that they should be able to obtain guns anyway, to protect themselves or to deter government tyranny, or simply for sport. Many of these people will continue to believe that they should be able to buy their arsenals even if they're informed of the negative externalities of firearms — that the benefits are still worth the downsides.

But at least that would be an informed decision. Right now, most Americans are ignoring, or just don't know, some of the biggest consequences of the country's lax gun laws. They have reached a view on gun policy without having all of the relevant information.