

Mass Shootings in Schools

The Worst Possible Case for Gun Control

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The most frequent policy lesson drawn following the Columbine school shootings was the need for more gun controls. Review of the details of both Columbine and other contemporary school shootings indicates, however, that the specific gun control measures proposed in their aftermath were largely irrelevant and almost certainly could not have prevented the incidents or reduced their death tolls. These measures included restrictions on gun shows, child access prevention laws mandating locking up guns, and bans on assault weapons. Ironically, exploitation of school shootings for the advocacy of irrelevant gun controls may have obscured the genuine merits of various gun control measures for reducing “ordinary” gun violence. Thus, mass school shootings provided the worst possible basis for supporting gun control.

Keywords: *gun control; mass shootings; school violence*

On the morning of April 20, 1999, two high school students named Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, carrying four guns and more than thirty homemade bombs. By the time they finished their deadly work and committed suicide, they had killed a teacher and 12 of their fellow students and wounded 24 others. At the time, it was the worst mass shooting in U.S. history. The diary of one of the killers indicated that they had been planning the massacre for months. The killers had also planned to kill themselves at the end of the slaughter, leaving a suicide note (Muschert & Larkin, 2007; *Newsweek*, May 3, 1999).

The role of firearms in the Columbine murders was stressed from the very beginning of reporting of the incident, albeit sometimes inaccurately, and gun control as a preventive measure was a major part of pundits’ commentary. Indeed, the *New York Times*’s very first story on Columbine stressed the gun angle in its second paragraph: “Exactly what prompted their attack, and where they obtained the arsenal of weapons to carry it out, is not yet known” (April 21, 1999, p. A22). In the weeks and months that followed, it was a rare article on Columbine that did not focus to some extent on the gun theme.

It bears emphasizing that gun control was not merely one of many themes stressed in the media following Columbine; rather, the killings were repeatedly attributed to too many guns and too few gun controls. According to a content analysis

of 675 newspaper and television network news stories in the 4 months following Columbine, “too many guns or too few gun controls” was by far the most common way of defining the “school shooting problem.” Fully 42% of the news stories defined the problem this way, far outdistancing any of 10 other broad categories of problem definition coded by the authors. Only 1 other problem definition was found in more than 11% of the stories—the very broad “popular culture” problem definition, which appeared in 28% of the stories. The news media’s definition of the problem did not translate into so large a share of the legislation proposed in the aftermath of Littleton, but gun control proposals nevertheless were the 2nd most common kind of bill (out of 11 coded) introduced in the 106th Congress in response to school violence, outnumbered only by bills focusing on “school programs and security” (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004, p. 1197).

Some points about the involvement of guns in the Columbine killings require clarification, however, because they were widely misrepresented in early news accounts. For example, that same initial *New York Times* story falsely claimed that the shootings involved “automatic fire,” and later stories used phrases like “sprayed bullets” that also hinted at fully automatic fire, like that which machineguns can produce. None of the guns used in the incident were capable of automatic fire. All were ordinary firearms that could fire just one shot with each trigger pull. An anchor at MSNBC on the day after the shootings (April 21, 1999) falsely reported that the killers used “assault rifles,” only to be contradicted minutes later by an off-camera reporter who provided a list of the killers’ guns that did not include any assault rifles.

The *New York Times* also erroneously claimed that the Columbine incident had “the largest death toll in an act of terrorism at one of the nation’s schools.” In fact, that grim distinction belongs to a mass murder committed with explosives rather than guns. On May 18, 1927, farmer Andrew Kehoe set off a series of explosions in the Bath Consolidated School in Michigan, killing 45 and injuring another 58—mostly schoolchildren (*New York Times*, May 20, 1927). The Columbine killers likewise intended to kill most of their victims with two propane-tank explosives and more than 30 homemade pipe-bombs packed with shrapnel, but they failed to detonate most of them before police closed in and the killers committed suicide (*Newsweek*, May 3, 1999, pp. 25, 29). This point is worth making because *all* of the worst mass murders in U.S. history—not just the murder of more than 3,000 Americans on September 11, 2001, but all mass murders with death tolls greater than 32—have been committed with explosives or fire, not guns (Duwe, 2007).

Pundits across the political spectrum drew predictable policy lessons from Columbine and the other mass shootings that had immediately preceded it. Liberals asserted that various tougher gun laws would have prevented the tragedies or at least reduced their death toll. For example, *Newsweek*’s Jonathan Alter urged “cracking down” on guns shows, limiting handgun purchases to one per month (which Alter asserted would “inhibit some traffickers”), and mandating that all guns somehow be

made “smart”—use a “fingerprint recognition” technology that prevents anyone but the owner from firing it (May 10, 1999, p. 59). (No such technology existed in workable form for guns, then or now.) The editorial writers at *The Nation* likewise opined that the spate of school shootings was due to the “greater access to guns” among the current generation of youth and that it was “absurd [that] any 18-year-old can purchase a gun-show pistol without restriction” (May 17, 1999, pp. 4-5).

On the other side, progun or anticontrol conservatives doubted that gun controls possessed any such preventive efficacy. For example, a *Denver Post* columnist argued that gun control measures were irrelevant, asserting that “more than a dozen [gun] laws didn’t prevent Harris and Klebold from getting the arsenal they needed” and that these killers “would have shot their way through a metal-detection devices at the schoolhouse doors” (Denver Post Online, June 9, 1999). Some progun commentators even asserted that the killings could have been prevented, or at least short-circuited, by guards or teachers armed with guns, citing the case of the assistant principle at the first major mass school killing in Pearl, Mississippi (*Wall Street Journal*, May 21, 1999). He used his personal handgun, kept in his car, to apprehend the killer, albeit as the killer was leaving the scene (*New York Times*, October 9, 1997). The killer reportedly later told police that at the time he was apprehended, he was on his way to another school to continue his killing spree. On the other hand, an armed deputy sheriff arrived just 5 minutes after the Columbine shooting began, when only two people had been killed, and he was unable to stop the subsequent shootings (Muschert & Larkin, 2007). It is, however, possible that even more would have been hurt had the killers’ movements not been restricted by the presence of the armed officer.

Guns and School Mass Shootings

Columbine did not occur in isolation but, rather, was the most serious of a cluster of seven school shootings with large numbers of victims that occurred in a 19-month period of time in the late 1990s. There were seven incidents of shootings in or around schools, with four or more victims (killed or nonfatally wounded), between October 1, 1997, and May 30, 1999. There have never been large numbers of these sort of shootings—rarely more than three in any one year—but to the extent they were ever frequent, they were especially frequent in this very brief period of time (Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, 2008b). Some of their salient gun-related features are summarized in Table 1. (The Edinboro incident is something of a borderline case. It was a mass shooting at a school function, and the shooter and all victims were students or teachers, but the incident occurred at a dance hall used for a school prom.)

There are several gun-related patterns worth noting about these incidents. First, in five of the seven crimes, the killers used multiple guns. This is significant because it

Table 1
The Cluster of Mass Shootings in Schools, October 1997 Through May 1999

Date	Place	Killer(s)	Number of Dead	Number of Wounded	Gun(s) Used	How Crime Guns Were Obtained
10-1-97	Pearl, MS	Luke Woodham, 16	2	7	.30-.30 hunting rifle	Used own gun
12-1-97	West Paducah, KY	Michael Carneal, 14	3	5	.22 caliber semiautomatic pistol (also had 3 spare magazines, 2 rifles, 2 shotguns not used)	Stolen from neighbor
3-25-98	Jonesboro, AR	Andrew Golden, 11; Mitchell Johnson, 13	5	11	.30-06 rifle, .44 magnum rifle (also had 8 other guns not used)	Stolen from locked gun cabinet in burglary
4-26-98	Edinboro, PA	Andrew Wurst, 15	1	3	.25 caliber semiautomatic pistol	Stolen
5-22-98	Springfield, OR	Kip Kinkel, 15	2	22	.22 cal. semiautomatic rifle (50 of 51 rounds fired), 9 mm semiautomatic pistol (1 round), 1 other handgun not used	Gifts from father
4-20-99	Littleton, CO	Eric Harris, 18; Dylan Klebold, 17	13	24	2 sawed-off shotguns, 9 mm semiautomatic carbine, 9 mm semiautomatic pistol	Straw purchases at gun show (long guns), illegal private purchase from adult (pistol)
5-21-99	Conyers, GA	Thomas Solomon, 15	0	6	.22 cal. rifle, revolver	Stolen from locked gun cabinet

Sources: News articles in the Jackson (MS) Clarion-Ledger (10-2-97), Lexington (KY) Herald-Leader (12-3-97; 12-4-97; 3-6-98), Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (3-26-98; 3-28-98; 6-12-98; 4-3-98; 4-10-99; 7-4-99), Portland Oregonian (5-22-98; 5-24-98; 5-27-98), Denver Post (4-22-99; 4-23-99; 4-27-99), Atlanta Constitution (5-21-99), New York Times (10-9-97; 12-1-97; 12-2-97; p. A18; 12-4-97; 3-25-98; 5-22-98; 4-26-99), Newsweek (5-3-99), and Time (7-20-98).

implies the killers did not need guns with large-capacity magazines to shoot large numbers of victims without reloading. They could use multiple guns with ordinary ammunition capacities and reload one gun when its ammunition was exhausted, while always keeping another gun loaded to shoot or intimidate victims who might attack them. This is also typical of mass shootings in general, regardless of whether they occur in schools (Kleck, 1997, pp. 124-126, 144). Although not shown in Table 1, close examination of mass shootings also indicates that killers typically take their time, firing deliberately at individual victims over fairly long periods of time. Even the shootings with the largest number of rounds fired in the shortest period of time would not have taxed the rate-of-fire capacities of ordinary six-shot revolvers, even taking reloading time into account (Kleck, 1997, pp. 124-126). The same was true of Columbine—although Harris and Klebold killed or wounded 37 victims, they had at least 49 minutes to carry out their violent acts, from the time they began shooting around 11:19 a.m. to 12:08 p.m. when they committed suicide (Muschert & Larkin, 2007, p. 257).

Second, the Columbine incident was the only mass school shooting for which the killers obtained their murder weapons from gun shows. Instead, theft was the dominant method by which the killers acquired their guns (more about this in the next section). Third, news accounts revealed that all of these mass shootings were planned in advance. Columbine was, as in so many other ways, an extreme example. A diary of one of the killers indicated that Harris and Klebold had been planning the murders for at least a year in advance (*Newsweek*, May 3, 1999, p. 28). The other mass shootings, however, also showed the same basic trait of premeditation, albeit in milder form. Premeditation and planning is significant because it means that these killings could not have been prevented by gun control measures aimed at reducing or deterring routine or daily weapon carrying—measures such as locker searches or use of metal detectors at school entrances. A single planned instance of gun carrying is sufficient to bring killers' guns to bear on large numbers of victims. Killers planning on bringing guns into a school on a one-time basis for the express purpose of murdering numerous victims would have no reason to fear locker searches or to refrain from shooting their way past metal detector checkpoints. Indeed, at Columbine, Harris and Klebold began their shooting before even entering the school building—there was scarcely any need to “detect” that they had guns (Muschert & Larkin, 2007). Metal detectors may have some utility for deterring routine daily carrying of weapons into school buildings, but they are not relevant to premeditated acts of mass gun violence.

Where Did They Get the Guns? Gun Shows as Sources of Crime Guns

Harris and Klebold took four guns to Columbine High School on April 20, 1999: three long guns (two sawed-off shotguns and a carbine) that were actually used to

kill people, and a TEC-DC9 semiautomatic pistol that may or may not have been used in any of the killings. All of the long guns were purchased from three different unlicensed vendors at a gun show in December 1998, by Robyn Anderson, an 18-year-old friend of Klebold's. The pistol was sold directly to Harris and Klebold by a 22-year-old private owner in a separate transaction. This was an illegal transfer because Harris and Klebold were 17-year-old minors at the time, and selling a handgun to a minor was and is illegal (Associated Press, June 4, 1999).

Controls over gun shows were irrelevant to preventing the Columbine shootings or even reducing the death toll, for several reasons. First, the 18-year-old friend who legally purchased the long guns used in the shooting could also have legally purchased the very same guns in a gun store. She was legally eligible to buy the guns, both with regard to age (18 is the minimum age to buy a long gun, under both Colorado and federal law) and with regard to criminal record—she had none (Associated Press, June 4, 1999). Furthermore, Harris himself was 18 years old by the time of the shooting and, thus, old enough to legally buy all of the long guns used in the shootings for himself, without using a “straw purchase” intermediary. Moreover, Harris could also have legally purchased the very same long guns in a store rather than a gun show. Finally, as shown in Table 1, none of the killers in other school mass shootings got their guns from gun shows.

Much public debate following Columbine referred to a “gun show loophole.” There is no such loophole. The exact same federal laws and regulations apply to sales at gun shows that apply to gun sales in other locations. What is misleadingly described as a loophole is actually a designed part of federal law. For good or ill, federal restrictions on gun transfers, including the background checks required for prospective gun buyers under the Brady law, are intended to apply only to transfers involving federally licensed dealers (U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms [ATF], 2005). Private transfers, that is, those not involving a federal firearms licensee (FFL), are not generally regulated by federal gun controls, and the location where a private transfer takes place is legally irrelevant.

We can do nothing to prevent killings that have already occurred, so the irrelevance of the gun show issue to the Littleton shootings could be dismissed as being of purely historical interest. There was, however, also no pattern of guns being acquired at gun shows in the entire cluster of mass school shootings that occurred in the late 1990s. As Table 1 shows, the Columbine shootings were unique, even among mass shootings in schools, regarding the source of the guns used—it was the only one of seven incidents in which the killers obtained their murder weapons via purchases at gun shows.

It could be argued that spectacular acts of media-covered violence serve to generate support for measures that might prevent acts of ordinary violence, even if they do not prevent the extreme acts of violence that attract massive news coverage. Thus, perhaps the more important issue from a policy standpoint is whether more

ordinary shootings could be prevented by tougher controls over gun show transfers, or even bans on gun shows. The significance of such controls in turn revolves around just how frequently gun shows are the source of guns used in violent crime in general, not just mass school shootings. Some press reports cited an ATF report as indicating that gun shows were major sources of crime guns. The report in question (ATF, 2000) actually contained no evidence bearing on this question, but instead merely described the gun trafficking investigations undertaken by ATF. The report documented that ATF frequently investigated gun shows, but its authors also stressed that ATF investigations “do not necessarily reflect typical criminal diversions of firearms” (ATF, 2000, p. 53), and thus could say nothing about how often gun shows were used as a means of “diverting” guns to criminals.

The best available evidence that is relevant indicates that gun shows are negligible sources of crime guns. The largest nationally representative sample of criminals ever asked about the sources of their guns was the probability sample of 18,326 state and federal prison inmates interviewed in the 1997 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correction Facilities. Of the 3,372 inmates who reporting possessing a gun before going to prison, just 0.7% reported acquiring the gun from a gun show (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001, p. 1). Furthermore, there is no evidence that any of the few criminals who did get guns at gun shows could only have acquired them at such a location and nowhere else. On the contrary, surveys of both adult and juvenile criminals indicate that they typically have multiple sources to which they could turn to get a gun (May & Jarjura, 2006, p. 46; Sheley & Wright, 1995, p. 47; Wright & Rossi, 1986, pp. 212-214). Consequently, blocking just one source of guns would usually not prevent a criminal from getting a gun.

Some advocates of gun show restrictions have claimed that, although criminals may not directly acquire guns from gun shows, large numbers of them acquire guns from professional gun traffickers, who do acquire many of their guns from gun shows. This claim, however, is also contradicted by the overwhelming weight of evidence, which indicates that professional gun traffickers, regardless of how they obtain their supplies of guns, are of virtually no significance as sources of crime guns. The evidence further shows that criminals who purchase their guns (rather than stealing them) generally pay amounts at or below the retail prices charged in gun stores—even criminals in cities such as New York City or Chicago that have unusually strict local gun controls. This is plainly incompatible with a theory that profit-seeking traffickers buy guns at or near retail prices at gun shows (or gun stores), transport them from low-control places to high-control places, pay their other expenses (such as paying for the services of straw purchasers), and still manage to turn a handsome profit (Kleck & Wang, in press). In sum, all of the relevant evidence indicates that gun shows are not significant sources of crime guns, regardless of whether one is speaking of direct acquisition by the ultimate criminal user or indirect acquisition via gun traffickers.

Theft as the Most Important Method of Gun Acquisition— Both in School Mass Shootings and Ordinary Crime

Table 1 indicates how guns were acquired by the killers in the seven largest-scale mass shootings in schools in the period just before and after Columbine. In two of the seven incidents, the killings were committed with the killers' own personally owned guns, which they already owned prior to planning to commit mass murder—guns to which they had authorized access (Pearl, Mississippi, and Springfield, Oregon). In Littleton, the long guns actually used to kill victims had been legally purchased for the killers by an adult (18-year-old) friend at a gun show, who then passed them on to Harris and Klebold, unaware of their deadly plans. In the remaining four cases, the guns were stolen by the killers. Thus, in this handful of extremely violent incidents, theft was the most common means of obtaining the murder weapons.

This generalization is not, however, limited to the guns used in mass shootings. It also applies to ordinary gun violence, involving single victims and locations other than schools. The most detailed questioning of criminals about their methods of gun acquisition was by Wright and Rossi (1986), who found that theft was an especially important method of acquisition. When asked how they had obtained their most recently acquired handgun, 32% of the felons reported that they had personally stolen the gun. They were also asked if they believed their most recently acquired handgun was stolen, and 46% stated the weapon was "definitely stolen" (these inmates presumably including the 32% who had stolen the gun themselves), whereas another 24% indicated that the weapon was "probably stolen" (p. 196). Thus, 46% to 70% of these criminals' handguns were believed by them to have been stolen.

Based on the National Crime Victimization Survey, at least half a million guns are stolen each year in the United States, and in light of underreporting of crime, the true total is almost certainly larger. Even if all other sources of crime guns were eliminated, a single year's worth of gun theft alone would be more than enough to completely resupply all the criminals who commit gun crimes in a given year (Kleck, 1999; Kleck & Wang, in press). In sum, theft is important to gun violence, both ordinary and extraordinary, whereas gun shows are not. If one lesson drawn from Columbine was that we need to "crack down" on gun shows, it was a bad lesson, both from the standpoint of preventing another Columbine and from the standpoint of reducing more ordinary gun violence.

Locking Up Guns

Some gun control advocates who asserted that youth access to guns was a crucial cause of school massacres argued that this was partly attributable to the failure of gun owners, especially parents, to properly secure their guns. The leader of a gun

control advocacy group named Catherine Christofel was quoted at length in the *New York Times* following the Jonesboro killings, to the effect that young killers had guns because “an adult didn’t lock up the gun.” Her organization favored child access prevention (CAP) laws that require gun owners to keep their guns locked up and/or hold adult gun owners responsible if a youth accesses a poorly secured gun and harms someone with it. Leaving aside the merits of this proposal with regard to preventing gun violence in general, it was an especially irrelevant measure with regard to the Jonesboro shootings. To obtain the weapons used in the killings, the killers broke into a house and removed the weapons from a gun cabinet, where they were secured with a 3/16-inch aircraft cable and a key-operated padlock (*Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, April 10, 1999, p. B1).

The merits of locking up guns are obvious—it prevents unauthorized access to guns and might thereby reduce gun violence. Even the National Rifle Association (NRA) encourages gun owners to keep their guns locked up when not in use. (They exempt, however, guns kept for reasons of self-protection.) Arguments made in favor of CAP laws, however, consistently ignore two facts: (a) Gun owners who store their guns loaded and unlocked do so to keep them ready to use for defense against criminals, and (b) defensive use of guns is both common and effective in preventing injury and property loss. Consequently, any control measure that made guns less accessible to unauthorized young people would also make them less accessible to crime victims who needed to retrieve a gun quickly to defend themselves against a criminal in their home. One cannot have the benefits of the former without the costs of the latter.

Thus, whether locking up all guns, including those kept for defensive reasons, is a good idea depends to a great extent on which is more common: (a) violence that could have been averted or made less lethal by keeping guns locked up or (b) successful in-home defensive uses of guns that would be made impossible by the locked status of the gun. Regarding the latter, a 1994 national survey estimated that in the previous year there had been 2.5 million defensive gun uses against criminals, of which 73% were in or near the victim’s home (“near” referred to the victim’s yard or their apartment’s hallway), or about 1.8 million home uses (Kleck & Gertz, 1995, pp. 184-185). At least 20 other surveys also indicate that there are huge numbers of defensive gun uses, with estimates ranging from 800,000 to 3.6 million annual uses in all locations (Kleck, 2001c, pp. 216-217). Likewise, a large-scale ($n = 5,238$ completed interviews) survey conducted by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that each year there were about 1.0 million incidents in which a crime victim saw an intruder in, or trying to get into, his or her home and retrieved a gun in response (Ikeda, Dahlberg, Sacks, Mercy, & Powell, 1997). It is currently unknown, however, what share of defensive gun uses would be impossible if a given amount of time were required to unlock (and possibly load) a gun. It is only known that criminals rarely give their victims advance warning of an intended crime and that unlocking a gun adds time to the deployment of the weapon for use against a criminal.

Concerning the harms that might be prevented by locking up guns, many gun homicides are committed in the victim's home, but most of these involve nonresident offenders who bring their own guns from outside the victim's home (Kleck, 2001b). Gun suicides commonly are committed in the victim's home, but the guns usually belong to the victim, who would have the key or combination if the gun were kept locked. There is no logical reason to believe that, among persons sufficiently motivated to kill themselves as to put a loaded gun to their head, the extra 10 to 20 seconds it would take to disengage a gun lock would cause the person to reconsider their suicide attempt. Finally, a large share of fatal gun accidents occur in the victim's home, but like those who use guns in suicides, most adults and adolescents who accidentally shot themselves or others do so with their own guns and, thus, would have the key or combination to disengage any lock (Kleck 1997).

CAP laws are most commonly justified with respect to preventing accidents resulting from unauthorized access to guns among younger children, who are less likely than adolescents to have authorized access to household guns. Gun accidents, however, rarely involve preadolescent children (Kleck 2001a). In 2003, out of 730 total fatal gun accidents in the United States, only 51 had victims younger than age 13 (National Safety Council, 2007, p. 32), and many of these did not occur in homes or involve unauthorized access to unlocked guns. On the other hand, young people age 13 or older, that is, adolescents, are likely to have authorized access to household guns, making gun locks irrelevant.

Not surprisingly, the most sophisticated research has found CAP laws to be ineffective in reducing gun accidents among young people. Webster and Starnes (2000) and Hepburn, Azrael, Miller, and Hemenway (2006) assessed the impact of these laws on fatal gun accidents among persons younger than age 15, in each of 15 states where they had been implemented, and found that CAP laws had no impact in any of the states except Florida. It is questionable, however, whether even this effect could be attributed to the law itself. Enormous publicity accompanied the implementation of Florida's law, because it was the first state to implement such a law. The extraordinary volume of publicity about the dangers of keeping unlocked guns in the home, rather than the existence of the law or its enforcement, may have raised gun owners' awareness of the risks of storing their guns unlocked and stimulated changes in their storage practices. Unfortunately, publicity-based effects that are dependent on the novelty of first implementation cannot easily be repeated in a national news media context.

Banning "Assault Weapons"

The term *assault weapon* (AW) is a propagandistic, with no specific technical definition in firearms reference works. Its precise meaning is vague, but as used by advocates and journalists, it appears to primarily refer to semiautomatic firearms and sometimes more specifically to those that are "military-style," that is, that bear a

cosmetic resemblance to military firearms. AWs are not any more lethal, shot for shot, than their non-AW counterparts. Supporters of AW bans instead stress their supposedly higher rate of fire and large magazine capacities. A semiautomatic gun can fire just one shot per trigger pull but automatically loads another cartridge into firing position, without requiring any additional action by the shooter. It is sometimes claimed that these guns can be easily converted to fire in fully automatic mode, that is, fire like a machinegun, but the evidence indicates that this is almost never actually done (Kleck, 1997, pp. 121-124).

Semiautomatic fire may be slightly faster than that permitted by an ordinary revolver, but the real limiting factor on effective rate of fire is the shooter's ability to pull the trigger and to accurately aim the gun while doing so. Even shooters firing traditional double-action revolvers can easily fire six rounds in 2 or 3 seconds, far faster than the shooters in actual mass shootings ever fire their guns, and none but the most expert shooters can shoot accurately at such a high rate of fire (Kleck, 1997, pp. 122-126). For example, the killers at Columbine killed or wounded about 37 victims in a period of about 49 minutes, or around 80 seconds per victim. Even if they had fired 10 times as many shots as wounded victims, it is clear that they did not need rapid-fire guns to do all of their shooting. Thus, the higher rate of fire supposedly afforded by semiautomatic firearms is a purely theoretical potentiality, rather than a capability actually exploited in real-world shootings. Banning semiautomatic guns, or some subset thereof, therefore, would not prevent mass shootings, or reduce their victim counts, by changing the shooters' rates of fire.

A somewhat more plausible benefit of AW bans would be reducing the number of rounds that they could fire without reloading. Revolvers typically carry no more than 6 rounds, whereas many semiautomatic pistols and rifles can accept detachable magazines capable of holding as many as 32 rounds and are routinely sold with magazines holding up to 10 rounds (the upper limit imposed by the 1994 federal AW ban). In the context of a mass shooting, forcing a shooter to reload might give victims the opportunity to attack the shooter and prevent any further loss of life. The problem with this reasoning is that mass shooters rarely have just one gun (Table 1; see also Kleck, 1997, p. 144). Those armed with multiple loaded guns can, even if each of the guns has a limited ammunition capacity, simply drop each gun once its ammunition is exhausted and continue firing with the next gun. Or they can reload one gun while holding victims at bay with another loaded gun. In sum, AW bans are irrelevant to preventing mass shootings and certainly irrelevant to preventing acts of ordinary gun violence that involve far fewer victims and shots fired.

Ban All Guns, or Handguns, or “Saturday Night Specials”

On the other hand, other gun control proposals stimulated by Columbine are probably worse than irrelevant. In response to this and other highly publicized acts

of gun violence, gun control advocacy groups have taken the opportunity to renew their calls for banning either the small, inexpensive handguns known as “Saturday Night Specials” (SNSs) or banning handguns in general (though overt calls for handgun bans have become increasingly rare in recent years). The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence supports banning SNSs as well as AWs (Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, 2008a). As recently as 2000, the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence favored banning all handguns (Kleck, 2001a), though their current position on this issue cannot be determined from their Web site (<http://www.csgv.org/site/c.pmL5JnO7KzE/b.3509205>, accessed July 31, 2008). The same is true of the Violence Policy Center, which explicitly advocated a national handgun ban in 2000 (Violence Policy Center 2000), but was no longer expressing any such clear advocacy by 2009 (Violence Policy Center 2009). Thus, it does not appear that any prominent gun control advocacy organization overtly advocates banning all handguns anymore. This is not, however, the same as saying that these organizations do not favor such a ban.

Selective bans on less lethal varieties of guns encourage the substitution of more lethal types of guns. The most likely substitute for a small, cheap handgun is a somewhat larger, more expensive one, not a knife or club. Where the availability of small-caliber, less lethal handguns is reduced, offenders who otherwise would have used these guns are motivated to substitute larger caliber, and thus more lethal, varieties of handguns. And if handgun bans succeeded in producing handgun scarcity among violence-prone people, long guns such as sawed-off shotguns would be substituted. Surveys of prison inmates confirm that these are indeed the most likely criminal adaptations to SNS or handgun bans—most offenders who had committed crimes with handguns said that they would substitute a sawed-off long gun if they could not get a handgun and would substitute a larger, better quality handgun if they could not get a small, cheap one (Wright & Rossi, 1986, pp. 215-223).

Larger caliber handguns are more lethal than smaller caliber ones, and better quality, more expensive handguns are more reliable and likely to fire when the trigger is pulled than less expensive ones. Likewise, as a class, long guns are more lethal than handguns. Thus, either the substitution of bigger handguns for smaller SNSs, or the substitution of long guns for handguns, is likely to produce an increase in the fraction of gun assaults resulting in death. Most homicides committed with handguns do not require the concealability of handguns; sawed-off long guns would be sufficiently concealable, so crime circumstances would usually permit these substitutions (Kleck, 1997, pp. 130-139). Of course, in the planned armed assaults of mass school shootings, concealability of firearms is even less relevant, as is demonstrated by the frequent use of long guns and larger handguns (Table 1).

These bans on some types of guns would also share the underlying flaw that afflicts all prohibitionist measures. The essence of all gun bans, regardless of which

gun types they target, is that they theoretically apply to everyone, criminals and noncriminals, offenders and victims alike. In practice, however, compliance rates are lower among criminals than among noncriminals, which implies proportionately larger decreases in gun possession among noncriminals than among criminals. Noncriminals use their guns exclusively for noncriminal purposes (this is essentially a tautology), including defensive uses, and defensive gun uses by crime victims reduce their likelihood of injury (Kleck, 1988; Kleck & DeLone, 1993; Tark & Kleck, 2004). Criminals, on the other hand, use their guns for a mixture of aggressive and defensive purposes. By reducing the violence-reducing effects of noncriminal victim gun possession to a greater extent than the violence-increasing effects of criminal gun possession, gun bans would, on balance, increase injuries and deaths—*if* they actually succeeded in achieving their initial goal of reducing gun availability. However, because the only gun bans that have actually ever been implemented in the United States are selective bans on subtypes of firearms, it is unlikely that any of the bans have achieved this initial goal—either because they failed to deprive violence-prone people of the target guns in the first place or because those who were so deprived substituted other types of guns.

In sum, one policy lesson is that gun restrictions should be selectively applied to high-risk subsets of the population, such as convicted criminals, to avoid the harms that arise if one also reduces victims' defensive uses of guns. On the other hand, gun restrictions should *not* be selectively applied to the least lethal subtypes of firearms, because this encourages the substitution of more lethal types of guns. The restrictions should either apply uniformly to all gun types or, if selective, should limit access to more lethal gun types more than they limit access to less lethal types. Because there are more long gun owners than handgun owners, it is politically unlikely that tougher controls will be imposed on rifles and shotguns than on handguns, making the latter alternative unlikely. This leaves restrictions applying uniformly to all gun types as the more feasible alternative.

Judging Policies From Their Failures

One problem with attempts to derive policy lessons from horrific violent events such as Columbine is that all of these incidents represent, by definition, failures of any and all violence-prevention efforts. Had any of them succeeded, the event, by definition, would not have occurred. Thus, regardless of how ineffective a policy might appear in light of school mass killings that occur, that same policy might have short-circuited still other violent events that never came to be. Unfortunately, it is impossible to prove a negative and, thus, impossible to prove that no mass killings have been prevented by any given policy. Precisely for this reason, there will always

be advocates who speculate that their favorite solutions to violence have prevented untold numbers of potential tragedies—an inherently nonfalsifiable hypothesis. A gun control advocate might, for example, speculate that some plots to carry out mass shootings were stopped because would-be killers were discovered in the course of attempts to obtain weapons.

One approach to studying mass school violence that “did not occur” is embodied by Newman’s (2004, pp. 263-268) analysis of 12 “near misses”—cases in which plots to commit mass school shootings were developed, but the shootings did not occur. Newman noted one common element in the thwarted plots—adult authorities were informed by fellow students associated with the would-be killers, and among the informants whose sex was known, all were girls. Newman inferred that boys bragged of their intended plans to girls, who in turn were willing to break the “code of silence” to which boys adhered and informed the authorities. In none of these near misses were the plots discovered as a result of the plotters’ effort to obtain guns or of gun regulations.

Why Are Irrelevant Controls Proposed? Gun Prohibition as the Issue Lurking in the Background

Many of those who advocated various irrelevant controls may well have understood perfectly well that they would not have prevented Columbine or the other mass school shootings. Even the most optimistic gun control proponent may not have believed that “cracking down on gun shows” would have prevented Columbine or any other mass school shootings. Rather, some advocates use these shootings, and the elevated levels of public concern that follow, as occasions to advocate for something they think is a good idea with respect to preventing “ordinary” gun violence (Kleck, 1999). Unfortunately, using a mass shooting as an occasion for advocating measures that are really only relevant to ordinary violence carries with it a serious risk—those who recognize the measure’s irrelevance to preventing mass shootings may be persuaded to reject measures that might be effective for preventing ordinary violence. This problem is addressed in the next section.

Some of the proposals that followed Columbine, however, are probably as irrelevant to ordinary gun violence as they are to mass shootings in schools. Advocacy of such proposals, especially by more strategically minded advocates, may be motivated less by a belief in their value for reducing gun violence than by the advocate’s desire to advance a long-term gun control agenda. Most gun control activists want to eventually achieve more than whatever specific moderate gun control measure is currently up for debate. Some—perhaps most—see advocacy of

modest “sensible” controls, including measures that even the advocates privately regard as ineffective or feeble, as stepping stones to gun prohibition, achieved one step at a time (Kleck, 2001a).

Mass Shootings—The Worst Scenarios to Use to Advocate for Moderate Gun Controls

The irony is that some of the proposed gun control measures that would have been useless for preventing either Columbine or the other mass school shootings of the late 1990s might be perfectly reasonable measures for preventing ordinary gun violence. The following are important attributes of the “typical” school mass shooting, if one can speak of a typical scenario for such infrequent events. First, the crimes are premeditated. The killers plan the murders, and how they will carry them out, for days or weeks in advance, and sometimes even longer. This means they possess a persistent ongoing desire to acquire the tools of murder, not a transient short-term desire. Gun control measures that merely delay gun acquisition, such as waiting periods, are therefore irrelevant, as are those that merely place minor obstacles in a gun buyer’s way.

Second, the guns used in the shootings typically either already belonged to the shooters prior to their formulation of an intent to carry out a mass murder or were acquired by theft. Only the shooters at Columbine used guns obtained at gun shows, and even this was purely incidental—the killers could have legally acquired the same guns at gun stores. Restrictions on gun shows are therefore irrelevant, both to Columbine and other mass school shootings. Furthermore, locking devices are irrelevant to blocking access to a shooter’s own gun, that is, one to which he has authorized access, and are relevant to the prevention of theft by would-be mass killers only to the extent that they can defeat the efforts of these strongly motivated thieves.

Third, the killers who seek to inflict large numbers of casualties typically use multiple guns, and often multiple magazines full of ammunition as well. Therefore, guns with large-capacity magazines were unnecessary to inflict even the very large numbers of wounds inflicted in these incidents without reloading. Controls on large-capacity magazines are therefore largely irrelevant to either preventing these incidents or reducing their victim counts.

Fourth, mass shootings, in or out of schools, take a long enough time to carry out that all of the shots fired could also have been fired had the shooters used slower firing guns. Thus, rapid-fire guns are not needed to inflict as many casualties as were inflicted. The significance of their high rate of fire is thus more potential than real. Controls on rapid-firing semiautomatic guns (which fire just one shot per trigger pull) are therefore largely irrelevant to either preventing these incidents or reducing the number of victims.

The terrible reality is that powerfully motivated and premeditated violence, especially that carried out by killers willing to die—by their own hands or those of the police—are among the hardest violent acts to prevent, regardless of what measures one might use to do so. Some of these gun-related measures proposed in the aftermath of Columbine and other mass shootings, however, have a good deal of merit with regard to ordinary violence. Opponents of the measures are given easy targets in the context of such shootings, because it is often obvious that the proposals would not have prevented the most recent tragedy. What gets lost in the shuffle is whether the proposals might help reduce the more ordinary sorts of violent crimes that, in the aggregate, are a far greater danger to Americans than mass murders, in schools or elsewhere.

For example, it would be a perfectly good idea for more American gun owners to keep their guns locked up. Any guns kept for purposes other than defense against crime should be kept locked, and even those kept for defensive reasons could be kept locked in ways that still left them relatively accessible to authorized users who needed them for quick defensive use. Trigger locks are inexpensive devices that can be affixed to guns to prevent them from being fired by unauthorized persons but can also be removed relatively quickly by authorized users with a key. This does marginally reduce their accessibility for quick defensive use, but it is an extremely effective protection against accidental discharge by unauthorized parties, especially children (Kleck, 1997, p. 318). Thus, it is a reasonable compromise position that could reduce gun accidents and other violent acts involving unauthorized access to guns but that recognizes the defensive value of guns and the need for relatively quick access.

It is not, however, a measure that is likely to prevent mass shootings, which involve either shooters with authorized access to their own guns or shooters with such powerful motivations that they are willing to obtain unlocked guns from any of multiple possible sources, regardless of the time and trouble required to do so. Like so many violence-prevention proposals, regardless of whether they pertain to guns, it is most likely to be effective with the least strongly motivated offenders who commit unpremeditated acts of violence.

It likewise would be perfectly reasonable, for the purpose of reducing ordinary gun violence, to extend background checks on gun purchasers to cover transactions between private parties, as well as those involving licensed dealers. This would not have prevented the mass killings by youth who stole their murder weapons, or received guns from their parents as gifts, but it could prevent casually motivated gun acquisition by convicted criminals and other high-risk persons who are less powerfully motivated than mass killers to get guns regardless of the obstacles. This in turn could make any violent acts later committed by these persons less lethal, helping to reduce the homicide rate even if it did not reduce the total number of violent acts (Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, 2008a; Kleck, 1997, pp. 388-390).

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