

Making the case for a world without guns



The time has come for a world without civilian owned guns, especially handguns and military style assault weapons. These weapons are inherently dangerous consumer products manufactured with the central purpose of causing harm to other humans. With the exception of narrowly defined recreational use, handguns and military style assault weapons have no positive value in the modern world. Many gun owners cite self-defence as a reason for gun ownership,¹ but this argument is both circular—individuals would not need to defend themselves if handguns and military weapons were not easily accessible—and not supported by the available data, which show that one of the greatest risk factors for firearm-associated deaths is owning a gun.² Therefore, most guns are produced, sold, and bought with the sole purpose of causing harm to ourselves or others. The closest comparative example of this is cigarettes, and during the past few decades the sale of cigarettes has been regulated and in many countries cigarette manufacturers now pay fees to mitigate the harm caused by their products.

No such progress has been made with guns. Gun manufacturers continue to operate with impunity avoiding liability worldwide, protected by powerful lobbies and statutory cover in many countries, particularly the USA, where federal law protects all gun manufacturers from lawsuits and consumer protection regulations, which almost all consumer product makers and toy gun manufacturers must comply with. Although substantial heterogeneity exists in the availability of guns, they continue to be available, and they continue to cause harm globally.

Paucity of data has hindered the articulation of a compelling case for the removal of civilian owned handguns and military weapons from society.³ The comparative analysis by Anna Dare and colleagues in *The Lancet Public Health* makes an important contribution to the argument that the world should be without guns.⁴ The authors report that between 1990 and 2015, nearly 2.5 million firearm deaths occurred in the USA, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia, of which nearly 1.8 million (70%) could have been prevented, if countries were able to achieve the same national mortality rates as those observed in their lowest-burden states. Furthermore, most firearm deaths occurred

among poorly educated, young men (aged 15–34 years) in the study countries. These conclusions make a strong argument for a world without guns, especially handguns and military style weapons.

Guns are a preventable cause of substantial mortality and morbidity worldwide. Dare and colleagues⁴ estimated that almost 1.8 million firearm deaths between 1990 and 2015 in the USA, Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil countries could have been potentially avoided. The data used by the authors did not enable the calculation of morbidity associated with gun violence, but other studies⁵ suggest that for every gun death, two to three individuals incur other non-fatal injuries, many of which are associated with substantial long-term disability. According to this estimation, around 5 million non-fatal injuries could have been avoided in the same time period, not accounting for the mental health problems associated with firearms, which are often overlooked. However, these data provide a comprehensive analysis of the burden of firearm deaths in only four countries. The Global Burden of Disease study⁶ suggests that 250 000 gun deaths occur annually worldwide.

The burden of gun violence, especially from handguns, falls disproportionately on marginalised and young adults. The sale of firearms benefits corporations and their stock holders, at the expense of minority groups or groups with lower socioeconomic status, who themselves seldom benefit from the profits associated with these sales. Such situations are morally unacceptable. The observation that most firearm deaths occur in young populations adds another dimension: incurring a cost that reaches far beyond the immediate loss, to the disadvantage of societies for decades into the future.

Is it then not time for us to consider a world without most guns? Such a call is opposed by arguments against its practicality and the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution. The global community has a history of finding solutions when an approach is deemed worthy of investing in. For example, the number of people who smoke cigarettes in the USA has been reduced by half,⁸ and globally, the number of people living in extreme poverty has decreased by four times in the past 40 years.⁹ These changes were unimaginable

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in 1980s. A world without most handguns and military style assault weapons might be unimaginable now, but data such as these from Dare and colleagues⁴ support the argument against civilian owned firearms, and prepare for a time when the question is not whether there should be a world without most guns, but simply how can this be achieved.

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I declare no competing interests.

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