

# SAM HARRIS

## THE BLOG

### FAQ on Violence

[Ethics](#) | [Self-Defense](#) | [Violence](#) | January 6, 2013



Having read many hundreds of responses to my recent [article on guns](#), and hundreds more to an earlier post [on self-defense](#), I now realize that there are differences in temperament across which it may be impossible to communicate about the reality of human violence. Many people simply do not want to think about this topic in any detail. I concede that, given the relative safety in which most of us live, this can be a reasonable attitude to adopt. Most people will do just fine walking the streets of

London, Paris, or even New York, oblivious to the possibility that they could be physically attacked. Happily, the odds of avoiding violence are in our favor.

Those readers who were appalled by my article on guns seem to recoil at the suggestion that one might want to prepare for an unlikely encounter with evil. *What is the best way to respond to a knife attack? How do home invasions actually occur?*—such questions can seem the product of an unhealthy imagination. There are people who consider using a burglar alarm at night or even locking their doors to be debasing concessions to fear. I have heard from many people in the U.K. who claim to be greatly relieved that their police do not carry firearms. Encountering my lengthy ruminations on violence and self-defense, these readers have begun to worry about my sanity.

Although I might find a few useful things to say to such readers, let me concede that the bar is probably set too high. Thinking about violence is not everyone's cup of tea. Again, I do not consider ignoring the whole business to be necessarily irrational (depending on where one lives, one's degree of responsibility for the security of others, etc.) It is irrational, however, to imagine that such insouciance can pass for an informed opinion on how best to respond to violence in the event that it occurs. I have now heard from many people who have never held a gun in their lives, and are proud to say that they never would, but who appear entirely confident in declaiming upon the limitations of firearms as defensive weapons. Before proceeding, perhaps there is general rule of cognition we might all agree on: It would be surprising, indeed, if avoiding a topic as a matter of principle were the best way to understand it.

Because beliefs about violence can directly impact people's safety, I feel a special responsibility to address some of the questions and criticism I've received in response to my writing on this topic. Here, I will gradually build an FAQ on self-defense, guns, and related matters, revising my responses as needed. Comments can be submitted through the [contact page](#) of this website.

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**1. You have overlooked the most basic point in favor of stricter gun laws: Countries with strict laws have much less lethal violence than the U.S. does. America's goal should be to become more like the U.K. And yet you seem eager to maintain a status quo that makes you demonstrably less safe and your country a scandal in the eyes of the world.**

[\(link\)](#)

If I saw a way that we could remove 300 million guns from our streets—perhaps by amending the U.S. Constitution and instituting a \$150 billion buy-back program—then I would be happy to weigh the merits of doing this. But, given the legal and political realities in the U.S., I don't consider the banning and confiscation of guns to be a serious possibility (nor does it seem to be a goal of gun-control advocates).

On this point, many readers have sought to shame me by drawing an analogy to my atheism: One of the primary criticisms of atheism, of course, is that it is quixotic—religion, we are told, is here to stay—and yet I persist in promulgating my views. On the subject of guns in American, I appear to have taken the defeatist side. Am I simply guilty of a failure of imagination?

There are many reasons why this analogy doesn't run through. With respect to guns, I need to make a practical and ethical decision about whether or not to own one, given my specific security concerns and the level of violent crime in the society in which I live. This is not the same as deciding whether or not to write a book criticizing religion. The choice to own a gun comes down to this: If I hear a window break in the middle of the night, I want to be armed with more than my idealism.

Many readers do not seem to understand how difficult it would be for the U.S. to follow the example of the U.K. or Australia, both of which stiffened their gun laws in response to atrocities similar to Newtown. Neither the U.K. nor Australia had anything like the level of gun ownership—or the political, legal, and historical commitment to it—that we have in the U.S. And the results of their own experiments with stricter laws have been [ambiguous](#).

The murder rate in the U.S. has fallen by 50 percent in the last twenty years—so it is moving in the right direction despite the omnipresence of guns. It remains extremely high when compared to rates elsewhere in the developed world, of course. And there seems little doubt that access to guns has a lot to do with this. The pressing question, however, is not how we can get rid of these guns—because the barriers to doing so seem insuperable. The question is what should we do in light of the fact that dangerous people are guaranteed to have access to firearms in the U.S. for the foreseeable future.

It is also worth noting that relatively gun-free countries are not as peaceful as many think. Here are some recent crime data comparing the U.S., the U.K., Australia, and Sweden. Although the U.S. has a higher rate of homicide, the problem of assaults and rapes in these other countries is worse. (**Note 1/20/13:** The crime of homicide is unique in that it admits of no ambiguity. However, many readers have pointed out that cultural differences in how often assaults and rapes get reported, and how they are defined by different police departments, makes comparing rates of nonlethal violence between countries problematic. I tend to agree. Nevertheless, these are the data that the UN supplies. **Note 7/18/13:** A skeptical look at international comparisons of crime statistics can be found [here](#).)

Incidents in the year 2010 per 100,000 population

**Homicide:**

U.S. 4.8

UK (includes Northern Ireland) 1.2

Australia 1.0

Sweden 1.0

**Rape:**

U.S. 27.3

UK (England and Wales) 28.8

Australia 88.4

Sweden 63.5

**Assault**

U.S. 250.9

U.K. (England and Wales) 664.4

Australia 766  
Sweden 936.6  
Scotland 1449.7

**Note:** UNODC data and those of the Australian government do not agree. For Australian rates of Assault and Rape, I have relied on the report issued by the [Australian Institute of Criminology](#)

Source: [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](#)

So, while the U.S. has many more murders, the U.K., Australia, and Sweden appear to have much higher levels of assault (I broke out the data on Scotland just to emphasize the point). One might think that having a few more murders per 100,000 persons each year is still much worse than having many hundreds more assaults. Perhaps it is. (One could also argue, as several readers have, that differences in proportion are all we should care about.) But there should be no doubt that the term “assault” often conceals some extraordinary instances of physical and psychological suffering.

**2. You seem inordinately concerned about violence. As you must know, you are far more likely to die from cancer or heart disease than you are to be the victim of a home invasion. And by keeping guns at the ready for the purpose of self-defense, you seem guilty of the very reasoning bias you describe in the beginning of your essay, wherein one’s perception of danger has been distorted by rare, dramatic events. If the statistics tell us anything, they tell us that by owning guns, you impose greater risks on yourself and your family than you mitigate. Hence, your own behavior should strike you as both dangerous and irrational. ([link](#))**

I do not believe it is irrational to prepare for very low-probability events which, should they occur, would produce the worst suffering imaginable for oneself and those one loves. And, as I pointed out in my [essay on self-defense](#), the actual probability of encountering violence, even in the relative safety in which most of us now live, is not as remote as many people think.

There are also psychological and social benefits to self-defense training, which offer further reasons to engage in it. If I thought, for instance, that practicing Brazilian Jiu-jitsu made people more fearful and neurotic, I wouldn’t recommend it—or I would tell people to do the absolute minimum to familiarize themselves with the problem of grappling on the ground. But I think BJJ makes people much more confident in the world (and for good reason). The art is extraordinarily useful—in the unlikely event that one needs it—but it also brings many other benefits. Thus, preparing for violence in this way need not be justified by a narrow focus on statistics. Whatever the likelihood of needing to use it for self-defense, BJJ is a good thing to learn. I would extend the same reasoning, albeit less emphatically, to owning and training with firearms. I sleep much better knowing that I am prepared for certain low-probability but worst-case scenarios, and I find the process of training for them more empowering than onerous.

Of course, I realize that I am much more likely to die of heart disease than I am to be the victim of a home invasion. I also realize that handling guns and keeping them in my home increases the risk of being accidentally injured or killed by them. I am also aware that other gun owners occasionally commit suicide or murder members of their families (or both)—and it could be that guns are more often used this way than they are to defend against crime (reliable information on the defensive use of firearms is very difficult to come by). But I don’t think these broader statistics apply to me (and I don’t think this

judgment is the product of a reasoning bias). Just as I can say to a moral certainty that I'm not going to open a meth lab or start a dog-fighting ring, I can say that I'm not going to commit suicide or murder my family. There are people who experience much more chaos in their lives who cannot honestly say the same. Such people should not own guns.

### **3. In your article, you said nothing about non-lethal weapons like Tasers and pepper spray. Aren't these obvious alternatives to guns? [\(link\)](#)**

There is no question that Tasers and pepper spray have their uses—and that is why police officers carry them. I think that Tasers, in particular, make a lot of sense for personal protection: They are legal to carry, non-lethal, and often effective. But their limited range and cartridge capacity, along with other vagaries of their operation, makes them (in my view) inadequate for home defense.

However, the question of non-lethal weapons is absolutely crucial—and I should have discussed this in my original essay. If there were a true, non-lethal substitute for a gun, more or less everything I have said on the subject of gun control would be moot. I would support a ban on all firearms (with the possible exception of rifles specifically designed for hunting) and champion this new weapon as the greatest breakthrough in applied ethics to arrive in centuries. And I suspect that most gun owners could be convinced to trade their guns for a nonlethal alternative, provided it had the stopping power and other defensive virtues of a gun. Unfortunately, we have not produced such a weapon (yet).

### **4. What about the role that guns play in violence against women? [\(link\)](#)**

Over at the [RDF website](#), Sean Faircloth has written a heated critique of my position. He primarily takes me to task on two points: “the evidence regarding domestic violence against women” and “the data confirming [the] success of gun control in other countries.” I believe I have addressed the latter claim above. On the subject of domestic violence, Faircloth writes:

Firearm assaults on female family members, and intimate acquaintances are approximately twelve times more likely to result in death than are assaults using other weapons. Two-thirds of women killed by spouses are killed with guns. This is not some minor secondary issue, yet Mr. Harris did not delve into it. It is the heart of the matter—a form of chronic and pervasive domestic terrorism. It is impossible to claim to address gun violence in American while failing to address domestic violence against women. The graphic for his blog on this topic is a picture of a handgun. And that is the where the discussion must be centered.

I share Faircloth's concern about the safety of women. Ironically, the danger that men pose toward women is my primary reason for thinking that guns should be legal and available to responsible adults. As someone who was raised by a single mother, and as the father of little girl, I tend to view all questions of self-defense through the lens of what will enable a woman to protect herself from a man who is bent upon raping and/or killing her.

This is where making the ethical case for guns is easiest. Generally speaking, men are larger than women, and even where no difference in size exists, men tend to be much stronger (especially in the upper body). Women, therefore, are at an intrinsic disadvantage in any form of unarmed combat with a man. That's not to say that women can't be trained to protect

themselves effectively. The average man would be demolished by [Ronda Rousey](#). But a man with the same skills will always tend to have an advantage over a woman, whether in striking or grappling—or even when fighting with non-ballistic weapons like knives, clubs, etc. As my friend [Rory Miller](#) points out, “size, strength and reach really matter with any hand-held weapon... and stronger people tend to be quicker as well. This is a huge genetic stack in men’s favor... All of that was neutralized by the introduction of the handgun.”

Yes, drunken fights between couples can turn needlessly deadly in the presence of a gun. But guns are not the reason that so many women live in terror of men—because guns obviate every difference between a man and a woman relevant to violence. Again, I will be accused of peddling NRA propaganda about guns being “an equalizer.” But it’s not propaganda if it’s true. I’m not saying that guns are the *solution* to the problem of domestic violence. Clearly, there is a need for strict laws, good policing, psychological counseling, women’s shelters, and other resources. Above all, women must refuse to stay in abusive relationships. But when all else fails, a gun in the hands of a woman trained to use it is the best solution that civilization has found for the problem of male aggression (I am speaking here, not about domestic violence per se, but about attacks on women in general). Indeed, there are situations in which a gun in the hands of a woman who is untrained can suffice to save her life. An ethical argument for the banning of guns must tell us why it would have been preferable for [this woman](#) to have been armed only with a frying pan.

**5. But this entitlement to firearms puts you on a slippery slope. Why not own a tank or a surface-to-air missile? ([link](#))**

Once again, the fault lies with an unwillingness to think about how violent crime actually occurs. No one has a legitimate need to destroy whole buildings or city blocks in self-defense. I view the question of gun ownership as primarily an ethical one: A couple of sociopaths break into your house for the pleasure of killing you and your family, and the police cannot arrive in time to stop them. What should you be permitted to do in self-defense?

**6. You say that you own “several” guns. This makes you sound like a collector or a fanatic. Why would a person need more than one gun for the purpose of home defense? ([link](#))**

Think about the ways in which a violent encounter in your home might occur. If you spend most of your time in your downstairs office, a gun in your bedroom will be of little use if you have to fight your way to it in the event that an intruder comes through your front door. The goal, from my perspective, is to be able to move away from a threat and arm oneself in the process—for the purpose of safely leaving the house with one’s family or defending them in place. Thus, the number of guns I own directly relates to the architecture of my house. (**Note 1/21/13:** Contrary to the bizarre conclusions that many readers draw here, this does not require that I keep a gun in every room.) Once again, if thinking about details of this kind strikes you as a symptom of pathological fear, the whole topic of home defense is probably not for you. You may rest assured that you are unlikely to ever be the victim of a violent crime.

**7. You say guns must be properly secured. However, if secured, they won’t be available for use in an emergency. You can’t be both responsible and well-defended. ([link](#))**

This is untrue. A gun can be properly secured and yet available in seconds. A [lock box](#) solves the problem.

It is true that many gun owners do not seem to understand the importance of locking their guns. As a result, [hundreds of children are injured or killed each year](#)—tragically and unnecessarily.

**8. It should be a matter of acute embarrassment to you that you have fallen for the NRA’s “swimming pool fallacy.” Please understand and rectify your error.**

[\(link\)](#)

Faircloth again:

Harris drags out the Swimming Pool Canard. You've heard this canard: Children are more likely to die in pools than by getting shot. Therefore children dying by gun violence should be dismissed as... just one of those things. Similar reasoning works like this: "Women are about eight times more likely to die from cardiovascular disease than by breast cancer, so all that concern about breast cancer is overblown." Please. It is entirely reasonable that society can, and should, work to address breast cancer – and cardiovascular disease, hospital hygiene safety (Harris raises this chestnut too) and handguns. The either/or choice is a rhetorical trick, not a reasoned argument.

I'm afraid that Faircloth and many other readers misunderstood the point I was making in my essay. I was not saying that because there are greater sources of injury and death in this world, we needn't bother mitigating the harm caused by firearms. In fact, I was making two different points: The first was that, if we value safety, we should keep our fears generally aligned with the facts. [According to the CDC](#):

Drowning is responsible for more deaths among children 1-4 than any other cause except congenital anomalies (birth defects). Among those 1-14, fatal drowning remains the second-leading cause of unintentional injury-related death behind motor vehicle crashes.

I was not minimizing the threat of guns or suggesting an "either/or choice" as "a rhetorical trick." I was putting the threat in context. The economist Steven D. Levitt has argued that if you own both, your swimming pool is about [100 times more likely](#) to kill your child than your gun is. If we want to keep our children safe, we should generally be guided by real probabilities. Thus, anyone who lies awake at night worrying about the prospects of another mass shooting, but reads email on his smartphone while driving his kids to school, has something to learn about relative risk. And anyone who wants to put a swimming pool in his backyard should consider the safety implications—which are analogous to those of owning a gun. The fact that guns are "designed to kill people," while swimming pools aren't, is beside the point. Such word games can be played both ways: A gun is designed to save your life when no other tool will do the job. Swimming pools are just for fun. As far as I can see, statements of this kind have no ethical content.

Of course, one of the main points of my article was to argue that certain low-probability risks, like mass shootings, might still warrant a response that is disproportionate to the number of deaths they cause. And I mentioned the problem of hygiene in hospitals for this purpose. I suspect that if Faircloth read the following paragraph again, he would understand it differently:

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Of course, it is important to think about the problem of gun violence in the context of other risks. For instance, it is estimated that 100,000 Americans die each year because doctors and nurses fail to wash their hands properly. Measured in bodies, therefore, the problem of hand washing in hospitals is worse than the problem of guns, even if we include accidents and suicides. But not all deaths are equivalent. A narrow focus on mortality rates does not always do justice to the reality of human suffering. Mass shootings are a marginal concern, even relative to other forms of gun violence, but they cause an unusual degree of terror and grief—particularly when children are targeted. Given the psychological and social costs of certain low-frequency events, it does not seem irrational to allocate disproportionate resources to prevent them.

I was not *minimizing* the problem of gun violence. I was explaining why it might be rational to consider the most marginal form of gun violence to be a bigger problem than the statistics say it is. Faircloth just didn't like the solution I proposed.

**9. In response to question #1, you seem to downplay the categorical difference between murder and assault. This seems dishonest. The U.S. has a higher rate of murder than any other developed country. Having a lower rate of assault in no way compensates for this. [\(link\)](#)**

I agree. Murder is worse than assault—and many assaults are quite insignificant. However, many crimes categorized as “assault” leave their victims physically and psychologically damaged for life. Frankly, I don't know what it means, in terms of aggregate human suffering, to trade 2 murders per 100,000 people for 400 assaults.

Consider the following interview, taken from Geoff Thompson's *Dead Or Alive* (p. 196-199). I have included the whole exchange as there is much to be learned from it, and it reveals what “assault” can mean in the U.K.:

Nev and Steve are in their early twenties and a part of an infamous gang in Coventry. Some of the details here have been changed, at their request, to protect their identity. They are not reformed characters and are still at large.

Interviewer: Why do you pick fights with people, Steve?

Steve: I like a scrap. 'Specially at the weekend, after the pub.

Nev: [laughs] Or in the pub.

I: Can you give me an example of one incident?

Steve: Yeah, we were going to the chippie after the pub, there was about six of us when we saw this bloke with his woman. She was quite tasty so I shouted, 'Get your tits out.' As you do [laughs]. We all cracked up laughing. The bloke she was with didn't look that happy though. I think he was



gonna say something but his missus pulled him away. I knew he was getting heated so I thought I'd wind 'im up a bit more. I might 'ave left it but the lads were geeing me up. So I shouted 'Fucking wimp, your woman fights all your battles for you, does she?' That really got 'im 'cus he shouted 'wot's your problem?' I could tell 'e didn't really want to go [fight], just didn't want to look a twat in front of 'is missus, loads of blokes are like that. Anyway, we all ran over to 'im, 'is missus was trying to pull 'im away but 'e wouldn't 'ave any of it. We all jeered 'im and I said, 'D'you want some then?' He tried to tell me that I was out of order talking to 'is missus like that, I said, 'she's only a fucking slag, anyway.' He started getting angry again so I shouted, 'COME ON THEN. LET'S DO IT! COME ON!' By this time I was right in 'is face, he looked like 'e was gonna crap 'imself so I shouted right in 'is face, 'YEAH! YEAH, COME ON you fucking wank!' Then I caught 'im smack in the face with the head [head-butt]. As 'e 'it the deck we all laid in to 'im. 'Is missus tried to stop us so one of the boys gave 'er a dig as well. Stupid fucking slapper. I said to 'er 'keep out of the way, you bag of sick.' Then we kicked pieces off 'im. Wanker. 'E deserved every thing 'e got.

I: Why did you choose him as a victim?

Nev: 'E was just there, and 'e fancied 'isself.

Steve: 'E was staring over at us as well, like 'e thought we were shit.

I: What do you mean?

Nev: 'E should 'ave just kept 'is big mouth shut and we wouldn't 'ave bothered.

I: Do you pick fights with everyone that passes you in the street?

Steve: Naw, not everyone, we 'ave to be in the mood.

I: Do you mean you have to have had a drink?

Steve: No, that's not what I said.

I: But you normally have had a drink?

Steve: Yeah, I suppose so.

I: What could he have done to avoid an incident with you?

Nev: [laughs] Lived in a different city. Naw, look, seriously, 'e should 'ave just walked away and

kept 'is big mouth shut, and kept 'is eyes to 'imself.

Steve: We was just 'aving a bit of a laugh, people take everything too seriously. If they don't give any lip then there's a fair chance that we won't give them a good 'iding.

I: What would you do if someone insulted your girlfriend?

Steve & Nev: They wouldn't fucking dare, they know what they'd get.

I: So really you're just bullies?

Steve & Nev: [offended] No way, we'd fight anyone, we don't bully. Look, if you live in Wood End then that's just the way it is, if someone shouts at you or calls your missus you don't say nothing back unless you're prepared to back it up. 'E wasn't, so 'e got some. End of essay! That's the crack. It goes with the territory. If 'e didn't want grief 'e should 'ave swallowed [backed down] and backed off.

I: Tell me about another incident, Steve.

Nev: Tell 'im about the bloke you put in 'ospital. The one that kept staring at you.

Steve: Oh yeah. The dick. I was minding me own business in the bar and this big guy looked at me, I was in a bad mood anyway cus the dole 'ad stopped me money. I looked straight back at 'im and said 'wot you fucking looking at, you bag of puke?' 'E said 'e wasn't looking at me, but 'e said it dead aggressive like so I walked over to 'im and asked 'im again what 'e was staring at. 'E swore at me and said 'e wasn't staring, 'e just thought 'e knew me from somewhere. I said if 'e wanted to go [fight] 'e should step outside, when 'e went to stand up I shoved my glass in 'is face. 'E was out like a light.

Nev: [obviously impressed] 'E was in 'ospital for ages.

Steve: 'Is own fault, shouldn't 'ave fucked.

I: I heard that you stabbed a guy in the same pub, Steve.

Steve: Oh yeah. D'you 'ear about that, then? That was the barman. He grassed on me to the law about the glassing so 'e 'ad to 'ave some as well. I 'eard 'e was a bit of a Karate man so I didn't take any chances. I walked in to the bar first thing in the morning, while it was quiet, less witnesses see. When 'e seen me 'e said I was barred, I said 'Look man, I don't want any grief with you, I know you can motor [fight], I just want to tell you that there is no hard feelings on my part, let's

shake on it.' Fucking wanker fell for it. As he grabbed my right hand to shake it I pulled 'im 'ard in to me and stabbed 'im right in the kidneys. 'E went down like a sack of shit. I booted 'im a few times and walked out.

I: Why do you think he fell for it?

Steve: Didn't know the crack, did 'e. Most of these trained fighters are the same. They're all bag punchers. [both laugh]

I: If you are such a good fighter why didn't you have a fair fight with him?

Steve: It was a fair fight. Where we come from that was fair an' square. Just because we don't follow Queensbury don't mean that what we do ain't fair. You know wot I'm sayin'. The only person at fault was the dick I stabbed, he should 'ave know the rules. I mean, what the fuck's 'e doin' in Wood End and not knowin' the crack. Maybe now he'll learn.

I: How did you conceal the knife?

Steve: I tucked it in the palm of my hand and held it against my leg like this [he demonstrates]. 'E was so pleased that I said I didn't want to fight that 'e wasn't looking for a tool anyway. They all fall for it.

I: You've done this before then?

Steve: Yeah. Loads of times. Not always with a knife, sometimes with a glass or a bottle. They all think it's Queensbury. Fuck Queensbury, 'e's been dead about a hundred years. I don't follow rules, I just do what works. [both laugh again]

I: What would you do against someone like yourself?

Steve & Nev: [laughing] Run.

Steve: The main thing is, I wouldn't let them get close to me, no one gets close to me. And don't believe anything they say, 'specially if they say they don't want to fight. If they say they don't want it [trouble] and back away, that's all right, but if they say they don't want it and try to get closer then you've got problems. 'Specially the ones who try'n touch you, you know, put their arm around you all pally, pally like. They're the worst ones. Oh and never shake 'ands with any of them. It's the oldest trick in the book but it suckers 'em all. Ben does that [speaking to Nev], shakes their hands and butts them straight in the face. Don't trust anyone.

I: Thanks for your time.

From a self-defense point of view, interviews like this are very instructive. Here, I will simply observe that men like Steve and Nev make the ethical case for putting weapons in the hands of good people better than a philosopher ever could. Reading their account of their crimes, one can see that their victims were given very little opportunity to avoid being brutally attacked—unless they were prepared to flee at the mere sight of these men and their friends. (Hence, the most important principle of self-defense: *Avoid dangerous people and dangerous places*). Given how they operate, and the fact that they live in a gun-free society, Steve and Nev know that they can assault virtually anyone they want. Readers may detect further odors of NRA propaganda here, but I would rather that these brutes be obliged to worry that their next victim might have a gun. I wouldn't want Steve and Nev to have guns, of course—and gun control advocates will insist on the impossibility of arming good people without simultaneously arming the thugs. But I'm not entirely sure this is true. Starting from scratch in a country like the U.K., it seems that it should be possible to keep guns out of the hands of violent felons while allowing responsible people access to them. (What if the penalty for selling or possessing a firearm illegally were life in prison?) This shouldn't be read as a recommendation that people actually carry concealed firearms in public. I am simply saying that society pays a price when sociopaths like Steve and Nev know that no one can or does.

In any case, all of this is beside the point in the U.S. Here, Steve and Nev already have guns, and no one has a plan for taking them away. Given that fact, we must decide how difficult we should make it for law-abiding people to have guns as well.

**10. Some of what you say in your article about the importance of guns for self-defense, and about the relative danger of knives, seems completely crazy. You suggest, for instance, that the only way to stop a man with a knife is with a gun. But you also say that even a Navy Seal needs a gun to fight more than one person. By the logic of your first statement, however, a Navy Seal with a knife should be unstoppable in a world without guns. [\(link\)](#)**

Let me spell it out more clearly:

There are, of course, other ways to stop a person with a knife. You can use a chair, a baseball bat, or any weapon that gives you a range advantage. To do this successfully, however—especially against someone who is determined to kill you—you should really be someone who is trained to fight with weapons, not a randomly selected elementary school teacher. The only thing that will reliably give the average person a true advantage over a killer with a knife, is a gun.

It is also possible to stop a man with a knife if multiple, intrepid (and hopefully trained) people attack him in unison. Someone will probably get badly injured, or even killed, but it is certainly possible for several unarmed people to prevail in this way. The problem, however, is that untrained people—who are naturally terrified of getting stabbed—will often fail to act in concert, and the person with the knife will retain the advantage.

Generally speaking, people tend to underestimate the problem of a knife attack—and most martial artists who train “knife defense” engage in drills that are totally unrealistic, thereby gaining a false sense of security. People who know how to fight with knives—like many career criminals—don't engage in single exaggerated thrusts so that you can grab their wrists and execute your favorite technique. And they don't slash from side to side like we've seen in the movies. They just rush in and stab you to death (read Don Pentecost's book, *Put 'Em Down, Take 'Em Out!: Knife Fighting Techniques from Folsom Prison*

). Any martial artist who thinks this is an easy problem to solve should watch [this video](#). (This is just a simulated attack, but it's realistic).

People in general—and martial artists in particular—also tend to underestimate the problem of multiple attackers. Most of us have seen hundreds of instances in which Hollywood heroes win fights against two or more aggressive men. That is not the way things tend to go in the real world. If you want to see how things usually go, watch [this video](#) of a road rage incident that ends very badly for a man who clearly has some reason to believe he can fight. (**Warning:** You will be watching someone get kicked unconscious on the sidewalk by two people.)

What a gun gives you is range. And against knives or multiple attackers, range is generally the key to survival.

**11. You say that the broader statistics on gun violence don't necessarily apply to you. This sounds, frankly, delusional. How can you believe such a thing?** [\(link\)](#)

Well, clearly *some* statistics apply to me. But it makes no sense for me to evaluate the risk of my owning a gun by lumping myself in with all the people who keep their guns loaded and unsecured, who suffer from clinical depression, who have not been trained in safe handling practices, who abuse alcohol or drugs, who persist in violent relationships, who belong to gangs, etc. These are not my cohorts. The person who smokes two packs of unfiltered cigarettes a day and works with industrial solvents has a greater risk of getting lung cancer than the person who does neither of these things.

To understand how owning a gun affects my risk of injury or death, I would need to know the statistics for gun owners like me. Yes, it is possible to be self-deceived about many of the relevant variables. I might, for instance, be prone to suicide and not know it. I might become an alcoholic next week or develop a brain tumor that causes me to behave recklessly. But I don't think these are reasonable suspicions to have about myself. As far as I can tell, I am emotionally stable and take gun safety very seriously. I am, in truth, more worried about my behavior as a driver than as a gun owner. I am far more complacent behind the wheel than when handling a gun.

But there is no doubt that by owning and training with guns I incur some risk of dying in a gun-related accident—and this risk wouldn't exist if I didn't own a gun. Perhaps the chance that I or a member of my family will die in a gun-related accident is greater than the chance of our experiencing a home invasion in which I successfully save our lives by using my gun defensively. If true, I have put us at greater risk by owning a gun (there are other variables to consider, but let's keep it simple). It still might make rational sense for me to own a gun in this case. Spend a little time reading about what the worst criminals in our society do to their victims, and you might agree that getting accidentally shot and killed is not the worst thing that can happen to a person. I am willing to incur some additional risk to be better able to respond to a very low-probability, worst-case scenario. How much risk? That's difficult to say. I believe we are talking about very small differences here. How does the added risk compare to the risk of taking my family skiing? I don't know. But judging from the numbers available, I do not think that keeping guns in my home (with the precautions I take) is the most dangerous thing I do. Again, not all gun owners can reasonably say this.

**12. Almost everything you have said about the reasons to keep a gun at home would seem to apply to the world outside (e.g. the police will probably not be around when you are attacked in a parking lot), and most violent crimes happen outside the home anyway. But you say that you have misgivings about civilians walking around armed. This makes very little sense.** [\(link\)](#)

Where self-defense is concerned, there are important differences between being in your home (or, perhaps, your place of business) and being out in public. It takes very little to establish that you acted in self-defense inside your own home. Domestic disputes aside, we are probably talking about a situation in which a person, who very likely has a criminal history, has broken into your house. In public, however, the question of which party was the aggressor is often open to interpretation. Indeed, you might even be confused about the situation yourself and wind up using lethal force inappropriately.

Imagine that you are carrying a gun for your own protection. You are trained to use it, and you have resolved to draw it only in a true emergency. While out one night, you see two men kicking a downed man on the sidewalk. Hoping to save a life, you draw your weapon and order the attackers to stop (generally speaking, you are allowed to defend another person whose life appears to be in danger in the same way that you would defend yourself). These hoodlums ignore you—do they even hear you?—and they have now succeeded in kicking their victim unconscious. You worry that the next blow could prove fatal. Having no other obvious recourse, and believing that you have a duty to act in defense of innocent life, you shoot one of the men in the chest.

But what if the downed man was, in fact, the attacker, and had just slashed these men with a knife? You have now shot, and perhaps killed, a person who was acting in defense of his own life. You had no way of knowing this, of course. But the fact that you were carrying a gun gave you the ability—and, it seemed, the duty—to intervene immediately and at a safe distance. Even police officers make mistakes of this kind—but running this risk is part of their job, and different laws apply.

Ordinary civilians who blunder into situations in which they use lethal force inappropriately can wind up going to prison for a long time. The much-invoked notion “It’s better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it” (or, worse, “It’s better to be judged by twelve than carried by six”) does not cover all the eventualities here. Carrying a weapon in public can lead even smart and well-intentioned people to behave in stupid and unethical ways.

And there are many other things to consider. The problem of storing a gun safely at home is relatively easy to solve, but keeping a gun safely stowed in public is much trickier. There are stories of people leaving their guns on public toilets. How many people carry their weapons in a purse, briefcase, or backpack? What happens when these bags get lost or stolen? No doubt, there are gun owners who have answers for all these questions and feel that they can carry their weapons responsibly. I know retired police officers who carry concealed weapons, and I am confident that they understand the attendant responsibilities better than I do. But I think it is perfectly rational for even a very well-trained gun owner to decide that there are too many risks associated with carrying a gun in public.

**13. You write in your article that no one is seriously proposing a ban on all guns in the United States. But many people have proposed this. Why would you deny that many Americans are calling for a radical change in policy?**

[\(link\)](#)

I’m not aware of anyone with political influence in the U.S. who has called for a ban on guns. Has Mayor Bloomberg called for one? No. He has said things like “Nobody questions the Second Amendment’s right to bear arms. But we don’t think the founding fathers had the idea that every man, woman and child could carry an assault weapon.” So, he wants to ban assault weapons. That’s fine, but this won’t put us on a path to becoming like the U.K.

If anyone would be calling for a ban on guns, one might think it would be Gabby Giffords and her husband, Mark Kelly.

They recently gave [an interview](#) to announce their commitment to gun control in the aftermath of Newtown, only to divulge that they both own guns and respect the Second Amendment. She has a Glock (the brand of gun with which she was shot and nearly killed), and he recently bought a new gun at Walmart. The reforms that they are calling for—all of which I support—will do very little to prevent the next massacre in a school.

Piers Morgan, who has been the most visible critic of our current gun laws—a distinction that inspired over 100,000 Americans to sign a petition calling for his deportation—has said that he respects the Second Amendment, agrees with Mark Kelly, and would not ban guns.

Governor Andrew Cuomo announced his plan to institute “safe and reasonable gun control” in New York, which already has some of the strictest laws in the nation, and confided that he owns a Remington shotgun and respects “hunters and sportsmen.” He vowed that he would not be “taking people’s guns.”

In fact, I have not heard anyone propose restrictions as tight as I advocated in my article, and yet I have been widely attacked as a shill for the NRA. I support all the measures that Bloomberg, Giffords, Kelly, and Cuomo have advocated—universal background checks, a national database of weapons sales, checks against the terrorist watch list, the strengthening mental health screening, etc. But I have gone further in suggesting that owning a gun should be “made as difficult as getting a license to fly an airplane, requiring dozens of hours of training.” There may be much to criticize about that final suggestion, but I’m not sure how it aligns me with the NRA.

I maintain that with 300 million guns already on the ground, it will remain easy for the wrong people to get guns. And a ban on assault weapons will do nothing to address this problem. Another mass shooter, armed with Giffords’s Glock and Cuomo’s shotgun, could murder as many children as Adam Lanza did in Newtown.

So, I see only two options with respect to school shootings: (1) We can admit that these are extraordinarily rare events, hope they remain so, and then do nothing apart from implementing the above reforms; or (2) we can decide that school shootings, however rare, are simply intolerable—and we can spend the \$10 billion or so it would cost each year to put a cop in every school. There is no guarantee, of course, that option (2) would be effective. But those who think that it is *obviously* a bad idea, beyond its cost, seem to suffer from many misconceptions about guns and violence.

**14. In your essay on guns, you write: [\(link\)](#)**

Given the changes that have occurred in our military, and even in our politics, the idea that a few pistols and an AR 15 in every home constitutes a necessary bulwark against totalitarianism is fairly ridiculous. If you believe that the armed forces of the United States might one day come for you—and you think your cache of small arms will suffice to defend you if they do—I’ve got a black helicopter to sell you.

**But the history of tyrannical governments—not to mention our own recent adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq—demonstrate that small arms in the hands of ordinary civilians can hobble even the most capable modern army. So what are you saying?**

The quoted passage has been widely misunderstood by gun owners. My point was that if you think you can fight the U.S. government *on your own*—Ruby-Ridge-style—you're crazy. And I was also suggesting that any concerns about a future tyranny in the U.S. seem unjustified. I am willing to bet that our Tree of Liberty need no longer be watered by the blood of patriots and tyrants. I think it is far more reasonable to keep guns for the purpose of defending oneself from ordinary violence than it is to keep them in anticipation of civil war.

However, one reader pointed out that it is ironic that liberal critics of American exceptionalism seem to cherish it on this one point—imagining that America is immune to fatal disruptions in the rule of law, coups, and other perennial excitements of history. Interesting point. I must plead guilty as charged. I'm simply not worried about despotism in the United States.

I should also point out the irony that an irrational fear of tyranny can bring on the very surveillance and violence it claims to anticipate. We saw this at Waco: If you spend all your time worrying that the government might seek to control you and take away your guns, and you acquire a terrifying arsenal to protect yourself, the government may well seek to control you and take away your guns.

**15. You are generally such a reasonable person, but on this issue you have produced one disjointed rationalization after the next. You seem to be making your case on the basis of pure emotion, rather like a religious apologist. Piling hypothetical scenarios on top of YouTube videos does not amount to an ethical argument or a prescription for sound public policy. *More guns = more lethal violence*. Full stop. That's the beginning and end of the story. The statistics are clear: Any argument in favor of gun ownership for the purpose of self-defense is an argument in favor of needless death. [\(link\)](#)**

It now seems to me that there are two ways of approaching this discussion that may, in fact, be irreconcilable. The first is to consider the ethical and practical case for guns as a means of self-defense. To make this case—or even to understand it—one must know something about how human violence evolves at close quarters, and one must care about specific examples (e.g. a young mother shoots a knife-wielding intruder). Here, it is easy to establish (and impossible to deny) that guns occasionally save the lives of good people who have every right to defend themselves and their families from malevolent lunatics. The second approach is to consider society as a whole, emphasizing the statistics on gun violence. Here, it is easy to establish (and impossible to deny) that in countries where nearly everyone has a gun, violence tends to be more lethal, and suicides and gun accidents more common.

Many people seem to think that the broader statistical case trumps the ethical case for self-defense. *More guns = more murders and suicides*. End of argument. From this point of view, anyone arguing for the primacy of self-defense appears to be standing in the way of societal progress. Consequently, many people believe that no civilian, no matter how responsible or vulnerable to violence, should be able to possess a weapon as powerful as gun—because any society that would make guns available to such people will, of necessity, be unable to control the sale of guns to dangerous, negligent, and suicidal people who shouldn't have them.

I do not accept that argument. I believe that the ethics of self-defense trumps the statistical case, for several reasons. First,



we simply do not know what the statistics would be if there were more stringent controls on gun ownership. Most gun deaths in the U.S. are suicides—and while the presence of a gun in the home certainly makes suicide easier to accomplish, and perhaps more tempting, some of these deaths would occur anyway (there were 38,364 suicides in the U.S. in 2010, half of which were committed with firearms). Gun homicide in the U.S. is mostly the work of career criminals—not the result of ordinary gun owners with no history of violence suddenly going berserk. If we could keep the guns out of the hands of criminals and the mentally unstable, there is little reason to think that the rates of murder and suicide in the U.S. would be inordinately high. Of course, we have completely failed to do this. But taking guns away from responsible people isn't a way of doing it either.

An ethical argument for the banning of guns must deal with the hard case: Where a legal owner of a gun—who stores it safely and knows how to use it—winds up protecting herself when only a gun would avail. I don't see why a responsible person should be prevented from preparing for the rare encounter with violence just because other people are unfit to own guns. As I have said, the prospect of gun accidents does not decide the matter. It isn't necessarily irrational for a person to incur added risk of injury or death to prepare for certain events that he or she considers worse than mere injury or death. We increase our risk of both every day in far more frivolous ways than by preparing to defend ourselves and our families against the worst possible violence.

Many people seem to think that guns radiate danger, rather like plutonium. Needless to say, if millions of our neighbors began asserting their right to maintain private stockpiles of plutonium for the purposes of recreation and self-defense, we would be outraged. And we would derive little comfort from the precautions that “responsible” plutonium owners took to handle this material “safely.” The mere presence of the stuff on our streets would impose an unacceptable risk on everyone.

But guns are not like plutonium. They are like cars. The number of homicides (11,078), suicides (19,392), and fatal accidents (606) with firearms roughly equals the number of highway deaths (33,687) each year. But when guns kill people, it is almost always because the person who pulled the trigger intended to cause a death (either his own or someone else's). When cars kill people, it is almost always an accident. This strikes me as a very important difference. People are doing their best to stay alive while driving, and to avoid harming others, and yet they are failing at a rate that exceeds that of *intentional* killing with guns.

Judging by the rate of accidental death, cars are much more dangerous than guns. More important, we impose much greater risk on our neighbors by driving than we do by keeping a gun in our homes. Many readers will object that this is an unfair comparison—“Guns are for killing people, while cars serve many necessary purposes”—but this objection misses the point. We are talking about the ethics of assuming personal risk of injury or death and of imposing such risk on others. The statistical argument against gun ownership derives all of its ethical weight from the following claim: *If we banned guns in the United States, we would save many thousands of lives each year.*

We could make driving much safer than it is, at very little cost, and yet we haven't done so for reasons that parallel the concerns of gun owners, while being far *less* compelling. We could, for instance, limit the speed of all automobiles in the United States, including Ferraris and other high-performance vehicles, to 65 mph. And we could reduce their powers of acceleration, so that it took over a minute to achieve top speed. How many lives would this save? Surely many thousands. Why haven't we passed an “assault weapons ban” of this sort on cars? Probably because it would make driving less fun. Most of us want the freedom to drive faster than a performance ban would permit—faster, even, than the legal speed limit.

We seem to be asserting our freedom to *break the law* at the cost of thousands of lives each year. This seems ethically indefensible.

Despite what many readers will think, this is not a comparison of apples to oranges, or a rhetorical trick designed to obfuscate the problem of gun violence. As I have said, I believe gun regulation should be much stricter than it is—stricter, in fact, than anyone can reasonably hope for in the United States, even in the aftermath of Newtown. But here, I am addressing the claim (generally made by readers living outside the U.S.) that guns should be banned altogether, based on the statistics. Never mind that no one can envision doing this in the U.S., I believe that the case is flawed even if the path to a gun ban were clear.

A gun makes it relatively easy for a person to kill other people and himself, whether intentionally or by accident. A fast car confers the same power. But it is easy to argue that a sane, law-abiding person could find himself in a situation where he needs a gun to save his life—and that he should be able to have one despite the attendant risks of gun ownership. It seems grotesque to argue that a person who finds himself endangered by violence in this way should be made to pay (perhaps with his life) for the irresponsibility and criminality of others. I cannot as easily make the same argument about a car that drives faster than the maximum speed limit or that accelerates from 0-60 mph in 4 seconds. And what if most highway fatalities were the result of criminals and suicidal people *intentionally* crashing their cars? Who would then advocate that we ban all cars or limit their speed for everyone else?

**16. In [a profile](#) in the *Atlantic* magazine, the writer said that “Harris thinks about violence more than almost anyone else I have ever met.” That should indicate to you that you have a problem. I have no wish to live in fear the way you do. [\(link\)](#)**

In all honesty, fear has very little to do with it. Consider what it is like to drive a car: Most of us aren't afraid when we get behind the wheel. In fact, we may even enjoy driving—and probably enjoy it most when driving fast. But we're also aware that very bad things can happen on the road, and we take prudent steps to avoid getting ourselves or others killed. I don't spend any more time feeling fear while training in the martial arts, or with guns, than I do while putting on my seatbelt or adjusting my rear-view mirror. And self-defense training is much more fun.

I also happen to be researching a book on these topics—and that *Atlantic* writer had come for the explicit purpose of interviewing me about Brazilian Jiu-jitsu. So, I'm not sure why he found it surprising that we spoke mostly about violence.

**17. Your position on banning “assault weapons” like the AR15 is contradictory. In [“The Riddle of the Gun”](#) you say that such a ban would be purely symbolic and that these rifles are not objectively more threatening than other guns. But then you say that you would support such a ban—which seems illogical. What is your actual position? [\(link\)](#)**

Point taken. The truth is, I am somewhat conflicted about this—and my support for an assault weapons ban is more rhetorical/political than anything else. As I've said, handguns are the problem. If you aren't dealing with handguns, you aren't addressing the real issue of gun violence.

A rifle like an AR15 is not scary for the reasons that most gun-control advocates allege—and there is no reason to think that Newtown or Aurora would have been any less tragic had the shooters been armed only with pistols. Rifles are scary because they allow even untrained people to shoot with great accuracy at distances beyond 50 yards. After only a few hours of

practice, a person can reliably hit an 18-inch target 400 yards away—surpassing the abilities of even the best marksmen on earth with a handgun. Thus, the rational objection to civilian ownership of these weapons is that they give people unwarranted destructive power at a distance. But, as I've said, hunting rifles pose a similar problem.

It is hard to argue that anyone needs an AR15 for the purposes of self-defense. If you are shooting someone over 50 yards away in “self-defense”, something has either gone very wrong with you or with the society in which you live. It is true that many gun owners think it prudent to prepare for the latter case. While I can't entirely fault their logic or their reading of history, and understand that it is a lot of fun to practice with an AR15, I don't take the civilian need for these guns seriously. So I'm willing to say, in effect, “Fine, let's ban assault weapons. Now can we talk about the real problem of gun violence?”

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## Notes

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