

# SAM HARRIS

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## THE BLOG

### The Riddle of the Gun

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[Ethics](#) | [Self-Defense](#) | [Violence](#) | January 2, 2013



*(Photo by [Zorin Denu](#))*

Fantasists and zealots can be found on both sides of the debate over guns in America. On the one hand, many gun-rights advocates reject even the most sensible restrictions on the sale of weapons to the public. On the other, proponents of stricter gun laws often seem unable to understand why a good person would ever want ready access to a loaded firearm. Between these two extremes we must find grounds for a rational discussion about the problem of gun violence.

Unlike most Americans, I stand on both sides of this debate. I understand the apprehension that many people feel toward 'gun culture,' and I share their outrage over the political influence of the National Rifle Association. How is it that we live in a society in which one of the most compelling interests is gun ownership? Where is the science lobby? The safe food lobby? Where is the get-the-Chinese-lead-paint-out-of-our-kids'-toys lobby? When viewed from any other civilized society on earth, the primacy of guns in American life seems to be a symptom of collective psychosis.

Most of my friends do not own guns and never will. When asked to consider the possibility of keeping firearms for protection, they worry that the mere presence of them in their homes would put themselves and their families in danger. Can't a gun go off by accident? Wouldn't it be more likely to be used against them in an altercation with a criminal? I am surrounded by otherwise intelligent people who imagine that the ability to dial 911 is all the protection against violence a sane person ever needs.

But, unlike my friends, I own several guns and train with them regularly. Every month or two, I spend a full day shooting with a highly qualified instructor. This is an expensive and time-consuming habit, but I view it as part of my responsibility as a gun owner. It is true that my work as a writer has added to my security concerns somewhat, but my involvement with guns goes back decades. I have always wanted to be able to protect myself and my family, and I have never had any illusions about how quickly the police can respond when called. I have expressed [my views on self-defense](#) elsewhere. Suffice it to say, if a person enters your home for the purpose of harming you, you cannot reasonably expect the police to arrive in time to stop him. This is not the fault of the police—it is a problem of physics.

Like most gun owners, I understand the ethical importance of guns and cannot honestly wish for a world without them. I suspect that sentiment will shock many readers. Wouldn't any decent person wish for a world without guns? In my view, only someone who doesn't understand violence could wish for such a world. A world without guns is one in which the most aggressive men can do more or less anything they want. It is a world in which a man with a knife can rape and murder a woman in the presence of a dozen witnesses, and none will find the courage to intervene. There have been cases of prison guards (who generally do not carry guns) helplessly standing by as one of their own was stabbed to death by a lone prisoner armed with an improvised blade. The hesitation of bystanders in these situations makes perfect sense—and 'diffusion of responsibility' has little to do with it. The fantasies of many martial artists aside, to go unarmed against a person with a knife is to put oneself in [very real peril](#), regardless of one's training. The same can be said of attacks involving multiple assailants. A world without guns is a world in which no man, not even a member of Seal Team Six, can reasonably expect to prevail over more than one determined attacker at a time. A world without guns, therefore, is one in which the advantages of youth, size, strength, aggression, and sheer numbers are almost always decisive. Who could be nostalgic for such a world?

Of course, owning a gun is not a responsibility that everyone should assume. Most guns kept in the home will never be used for self-defense. They are, in fact, more likely to be used by an unstable person to threaten family members or to commit suicide. However, it seems to me that there is nothing irrational about judging oneself to be psychologically stable and fully committed to the safe handling and ethical use of firearms—if, indeed, one is. <sup>[1]</sup> [1](#)

Carrying a gun in public, however, entails even greater responsibility than keeping one at home, and in most states the laws reflect this. Like many gun-control advocates, I have serious concerns about letting ordinary citizens walk around armed. <sup>[2]</sup> [2](#) Ordinary altercations can become needlessly deadly in the presence of a weapon. A scuffle that exposes a gun in a person's waistband, for instance, can quickly become a fight to the death—where the first person to get his hands on the weapon may feel justified using it in 'self-defense.' Most people seem unaware that knives present a similar liability. According to

Gallup, 16 percent of American men carry knives for personal protection. I am quite sure that most of those men have not thought through the legal, ethical, and game-theoretical implications of drawing a blade in a moment of conflict. It is true that brandishing a weapon (whether a gun or a knife) sometimes preempts further violence. But, emotions being what they are, it often doesn't and the owner of the weapon can find himself resorting to deadly force in a circumstance that would not otherwise have called for it.

## Some Facts About Guns

Fifty-five million kids went to school on the day that 20 were massacred at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut. Even in the United States, therefore, the chances of a child's dying in a school shooting are remote. As my friend Steven Pinker demonstrates in his monumental study of human violence, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, our perception of danger is easily distorted by rare events. Is gun violence increasing in the United States? No. But it certainly seems to be when one recalls recent atrocities in Newtown and Aurora. In fact, the overall rate of violent crime has fallen by 22 percent in the past decade (and 18 percent in the past five years).

We still have more guns and more gun violence than any other developed country, but the correlation between guns and violence in the United States is far from straightforward. Thirty percent of urban households have at least one firearm. This figure increases to 42 percent in the suburbs and 60 percent in the countryside. As one moves away from cities, therefore, the rate of gun ownership doubles. And yet gun violence is primarily a problem in cities. It is the people of Detroit, Oakland, Memphis, Little Rock, and Stockton who are at the greatest risk of being killed by guns.

In the weeks since the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary, advocates of stricter gun control have called for a new federal ban on assault weapons and for reductions in the number of concealed-carry permits issued to private citizens. But the murder rate has fallen precipitously since the federal ban on assault weapons expired in 2004, and this was also a period in which millions of Americans began to carry their guns in public. Many proponents of gun control have observed that the AR 15, the gun that Adam Lanza used to murder 20 children in Newtown, is now the most popular rifle in America. But only 3 percent of murders in the U.S. are committed with rifles of any type.

Seventy mass shootings have occurred in the U.S. since 1982, leaving 543 dead. These crimes were horrific, but 564,452 other homicides took place in the U.S. during the same period. Mass shootings scarcely represent 0.1 percent of all murders. When talking about the problem of guns in our society, it is easy to lose sight of the worst violence and to become fixated on symbols of violence. <sup>[ ]</sup> 3

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.

We should also remember that mass killings do not depend on guns. Much was made in the press about the fact that on the very day 20 children were murdered in Newtown, a man with a knife attempted a similar crime at an elementary school in China. At *The Atlantic*, [James Fallows wrote](#):

Twenty-two children injured. Versus, at current count, 18 20 little children and ~~nine~~ eight other people shot dead. That's the difference between a knife and a gun.

Guns don't attack children; psychopaths and sadists do. But guns uniquely allow a psychopath to wreak death and devastation on such a large scale so quickly and easily. America is the only country in which this happens again?and again and again. You can look it up.

This is more tendentious than it might sound. There has been an epidemic of knife attacks on schoolchildren in China in the past two years. As Fallows certainly knows?he is, after all, an expert on China?in some instances several children were murdered. In March of 2010, eight were killed and five injured in a single incident. This was as bad as many mass shootings in the U.S. I am not denying that guns are more efficient for killing people than knives are?but the truth is that knives are often lethal enough. And the only reliable way for one person to stop a man with a knife is to shoot him.

It is reasonable to wish that only virtuous people had guns, but there are now nearly 300 million guns in the United States, and millions more are sold each year. A well-made gun can remain functional for centuries. Any effective regime of ?gun control,? therefore, would require that we remove hundreds of millions of firearms from our streets. As [Jeffrey Goldberg points out](#) in *The Atlantic*, it may no longer be rational to hope that we can solve the problem of gun violence by restricting access to guns?because guns are everywhere, and the only people who will be deterred by stricter laws are precisely those law-abiding citizens who should be able to possess guns for their own protection and who now constitute one of the primary deterrents to violent crime. This is, of course, a familiar ?gun nut? talking point. But that doesn't make it wrong.

Another problem with liberal dreams of gun control is that the kinds of guns used in the vast majority of crimes would not fall under any plausible weapons ban. And advocates of stricter gun laws who claim to respect the rights of ?sportsmen? or ?hunters,? and to recognize a legitimate need for ?home defense,? simply give the game away at the outset. The very guns that law-abiding citizens use for recreation or home defense are, in fact, the problem.

In the vast majority of murders committed with firearms?even most mass killings?the weapon used is a handgun. Unless we outlaw and begin confiscating handguns, the weapons best suited for being carried undetected into a classroom, movie theater, restaurant, or shopping mall for the purpose of committing mass murder will remain readily available in the United States. But no one is seriously proposing that we address the problem on this level. In fact, the Supreme Court has recently ruled, twice (in 2008 and 2010), that banning handguns would be unconstitutional.

Nor is anyone advocating that we deprive hunters of their rifles. And yet any rifle suitable for killing deer is just the sort of gun that will allow even an unskilled shooter to wreak absolute havoc upon innocent men, women, and children at a range of several hundred yards. There is, in fact, no marksman on earth who can shoot a handgun as accurately at distance as you would be able to shoot a rifle fitted with a scope after a few hours of practice. This difference in accuracy between short and long guns must be experienced to be understood. Having understood it, you will in no way be consoled to learn that a

madman ensconced on the rooftop of a nearby building is armed merely with a "hunting rifle" that is legal in all 50 states.

The problem, therefore, is that with respect to either factor that makes a gun suitable for mass murder—ease of concealment (a handgun) or range (a rifle)—the most common and least stigmatized weapons are among the most dangerous. Gun-control advocates seem perversely unaware of this. As a consequence, we routinely hear the terms "semi-automatic" and "assault weapon" intoned with misplaced outrage and awe. It is true that a semi-automatic pistol allows a person to shoot and reload slightly more efficiently than a revolver does. But a revolver can be reloaded [surprisingly quickly](#) with a device known as a speed loader. (These have been in use since the 1970s.)<sup>[ ]</sup> [4](#) It is no exaggeration to say that if we merely had 300 million vintage revolvers in this country, we would still have a terrible problem with gun violence, with no solution in sight. And any person entering a school with a revolver for the purpose of killing kids would most likely be able to keep killing them until he ran out of ammunition, or until good people arrived with guns of their own to stop him.

According to the FBI's [Uniform Crime Report](#), 47 percent of all murders in the U.S. are committed with handguns. Again, only 3 percent are committed with rifles (of any type). Twice as many murderers (6 percent) use nothing but their bare hands. Thirteen percent use knives. Although a semi-automatic rifle like the one Adam Lanza carried in Newtown offers a terrifying advantage over a handgun at distances beyond 20 yards or so, I see no reason to think that the children he murdered would be alive today had he been armed with only a pistol (he is reported to have shot them repeatedly and at close range). The worst mass shooting in U.S. history occurred at Virginia Tech in 2007. Thirty-two people were killed and seventeen injured. The shooter carried two handguns (a Glock 9 mm and a Walther .22) of a make and caliber that will remain legal and ubiquitous unless all handguns are banned. (Again, this is not going to happen.)

It is true that rifles like the one used in the Newtown attack fire rounds at a much higher velocity than handguns do. These bullets also tend to tumble and fragment in the body, which makes them more lethal. However, one cannot say in every case that an assault weapon in the wrong hands is a greater threat to innocent life than a handgun. Rifle rounds travel at such high velocity that they sometimes pass through a person's body before tumbling or fragmenting—doing less damage than one would expect from a handgun round. Conversely, these bullets are so light and frangible that they are sometimes stopped by barriers such as doors and wallboard. It is also generally easier to grab the barrel of a rifle and wrest it away from a shooter than it is with a handgun. And rifles are far more difficult to conceal. Approaching the doors of Sandy Hook Elementary, Adam Lanza probably looked every inch the dangerous lunatic with a gun. Had an armed guard been at the school, this could have allowed for a defensive response. Given these facts, it is difficult to say that assault weapons pose a greater risk to the public than handguns do.

Regarding ammunition itself, there is not much more to say, because any type suitable for home defense or hunting—and, therefore, bound to remain legal as long as guns are sold—is also perfect for killing innocent people. The only other variable to consider is the number of rounds a gun can hold, because this dictates the frequency with which a shooter must pause to reload. Here the path to increased public safety is reasonably clear. In California and New York, for instance, one cannot buy magazines that hold more than 10 rounds. As a consequence, the moment at which a shooter can be tackled by bystanders comes after every 10 shots. Ten is a lot better than 30, of course, but it still requires the action of a true hero (probably several) who just happens to be standing close enough to the shooter to attempt to bring him down, and who is lucky enough to be alive and uninjured after the last barrage. As Goldberg notes, with understandable despair and amazement, the security plans at many schools encourage students to spontaneously arm themselves with pencils and laptops and engage a shooter directly in defense of their lives—all the while forbidding the lawful possession of firearms on campus, no matter what a person's training. As Goldberg says, "The existence of these policies suggests that universities

know they cannot protect their students during an armed attack.?

## More Guns Are Not The Answer—Until They Are

Coverage of the Newtown tragedy and its aftermath has been generally abysmal. In fact, I have never seen the ?liberal media? conform to right-wing caricatures of itself with such alacrity. I have read articles in which literally everything said about firearms and ballistics has been wrong. I have heard major newscasters mispronounce the names of every weapon and weapons manufacturer more challenging than ?Colt.? I can only imagine the mirth it has brought gun-rights zealots to see ?automatic? and ?semi-automatic? routinely confused, or to hear a major news anchor ominously declare that the shooter had been armed with a ?Sig Sauzer? pistol. This has been more than embarrassing. It has offered a thousand points of proof that ?liberal elites? don?t know anything about what matters when bullets start flying.

Consider the [sneering response](#) of the *New York Times* editorial page to Wayne LaPierre, the NRA vice president, after he suggested that we station a police officer at every school in the country:

His solution to the proliferation of guns, including semiautomatic rifles designed to kill people as quickly as possible, is to put more guns in more places. Mr. LaPierre would put a police officer in every school and compel teachers and principals to become armed guards?. Mr. LaPierre said the Newtown killing spree ?might? have been averted if the killer had been confronted by an armed security guard. It?s far more likely that there would have been a dead armed security guard?just as there would have been even more carnage if civilians had started firing weapons in the Aurora movie theater.

The phrase ?designed to kill people as quickly as possible? should tell us everything we need to know about the author?s grasp of the issue. The entire editorial is worth reading, in fact, because it makes the NRA?s response to Newtown seem enlightened by comparison.

Gun-control advocates appear unable to distinguish situations in which a gun in the hands of a good person would be useless (or worse) and those in which it would be likely to save dozens of innocent lives. They are eager to extrapolate from the Aurora shooting to every other possible scene of mass murder. However, a single gunman trying to force his way into a school, or roaming its hallways, or even standing in a classroom surrounded by dead and dying children, would be far easier to engage effectively?*with a gun?*than James Holmes would have been in a dark and crowded movie theater. Even in the case of the Aurora shooting, it is not ludicrous to suppose that everyone might have been better off had a well-trained person with a gun been at the scene. The liberal commentariat seems to have no awareness of what ?well-trained? signifies. It happens to include an understanding of what to do and what not to do when the danger of shooting innocent bystanders exists. The fact that bystanders do occasionally get shot, even by police officers, does not prove that putting guns in the hands of good people would be a bad idea. Gun-control advocates seem always to imagine the worst possible scenario: legions of untrained, delusional vigilantes producing their weapons at a pin drop and firing indiscriminately into a crowd.

Most liberals responded derisively to the NRA?s suggestion that having armed and vetted men and women in our schools could save lives. Some pointed to a public-service announcement put out by the city of Houston (funded by the Department of Homeland Security), in which the possibility of having guns on the scene was never discussed. Several commentators



held up this training video in support of the creed "More guns are not the answer." Please take a few minutes to [watch this footage](#). Then try to imagine how a few armed civilians could respond during an attack of this kind. To help your imagination along, [watch this short video](#), in which a motel clerk carrying a concealed weapon shoots an armed robber. The situation isn't perfectly analogous; the wisdom of using deadly force in what might be only a robbery is at least debatable. But is it really so difficult to believe that the shooter might have been helpful during an incident of the sort depicted in Houston?

Needless to say, it is easy to see how things can go badly when anyone draws a firearm defensively. But when an armed man enters an office building, restaurant, or school for the purpose of murdering everyone in sight, things are going very badly already. Imagine being one of the people in the Houston video trapped in the office with no recourse but to hide under a desk. Would you really be relieved to know that up until that moment, your workplace had been an impeccably gun-free environment and that no one, not even your friend who did three tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, would be armed? If you found yourself trapped with others in a conference room, preparing to attack the shooter with pencils and chairs, can you imagine thinking, "I'm so glad no one else has a gun, because I wouldn't want to get caught in any crossfire?" Despite what the *New York Times* and dozens of other editorial pages have avowed in the weeks since Newtown, it isn't a vigilante delusion to believe that guns in the hands of good people would improve the odds of survival in deadly encounters of this kind. The delusion is to think that everyone would be better off defending his or her life with furniture. <sup>[1]</sup> [5](#)

Unarmed people *can* be trained to respond intelligently to violent emergencies, and the [appropriate drills](#) seem well worth doing. (If you watch the linked video, you will see that rather than simply terrifying students, these drills can be fun and empowering.) Of course, there are no guarantees when tackling a man with a gun, and training of this kind makes sense only for students above a certain age. But such "active shooter" drills, if widely taught, would probably reduce the threat of mass killings. However, when a massacre is under way, nothing can substitute for the presence of other armed men and women who have been trained to fight with guns. That is why one bothers to call the police. And those who are horrified at the idea of stationing a police officer in every school should be obliged to tell us how long they would like to wait for the police to arrive in the event that they are needed. Declaring schools to be "gun-free zones" makes them especially good places to commit mass murder; this is more NRA propaganda that happens to be true. With the exception of the attack on U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson in 2011, every mass shooting since 1950 has taken place where civilians are forbidden to carry firearms [Correction 1/11/13: I have been informed that this mall is a gun-free zone too.].

As the parent of a daughter in preschool, I can scarcely imagine the feelings of terror, helplessness, and grief endured by the parents of Newtown. But when I contemplate atrocities of this kind, I do not think of "gun control" because it seems extraordinarily unlikely that a deranged and/or evil person will ever find it difficult to acquire a firearm in the United States. Rather, I think of how differently the situation might have evolved if the school had had an armed (and, I have to emphasize, *well-trained*) security guard on campus. I also think of how differently things might have gone if the shooter, who seems to have shown signs of mental illness for years, had been more intrusively engaged by society prior to the attack.

But my thoughts soon return to the armed guard, because our laws generally do not allow us to prevent crime—even when a person's bad intentions are reasonably well understood. As someone who has received repeated death threats—several of them from the same person—I know that little can be done in advance of an attack. In fact, our laws do not even allow us to keep the most violent criminals permanently off our streets. Eighty percent of the people languishing in our maximum-security prisons will eventually be released back into society; many having become more violent for their time behind bars—and 70 percent of those will return to prison after committing further crimes. We live in a country where nonviolent



drug offenders receive [life sentences](#) but a man who rapes a fifteen-year-old girl and cuts her arms off with a hatchet can be [paroled for good behavior](#) after eight years (only to kill again). I do not know what explains this impossible distortion of priorities, but given that it exists, I believe that good, trustworthy, and well-trained people should have guns.

Preventing low-frequency events like school shootings is probably impossible. If we enact laws that allow us to commit young men who merely scare us to mental institutions, we will surely commit thousands upon thousands of young men who would never have harmed anyone. This leads me to believe that if we care about minimizing the harm caused by the next school shooter, we should focus on stopping him at the doors of the school. To be sure, hiring enough guards to protect our nation's schools would be a daunting task. The security industry is notorious for poor quality control, and there is even reason to worry that some police officers have insufficient training with their guns. But it is clearly possible to hire as many competent guards as we want, should this become a national priority. This is entirely a question of money, not of whether it is possible to enlist, train, and equip 100,000 highly qualified men and women to protect our children.

As I said at the outset, I do not know how we can solve the problem of gun violence. A renewed ban on "assault weapons"—nearly the only concrete measure that anyone is talking about—will do very little to make our society safer. It is not, as many advocates seem to believe, an important "first step" in achieving a sane policy with respect to guns. It seems likely to be a *symbolic* step that delays real thinking about the problem of guns for another decade or more. By all means, let us ban these weapons. But when the next lunatic arrives at a school armed with legal pistols and a dozen ten-round magazines, we should be prepared to talk about how an assault weapons ban was a distraction from the real issue of gun violence.

One of the greatest impediments to actually solving the riddle of guns in our society is the pious concern that many people have about the intent of the Second Amendment. It should hardly need to be said that despite its brilliance and utility, the Constitution of the United States was written by men who could not possibly have foreseen every change that would occur in American society in the ensuing centuries. Even if the Second Amendment guaranteed everyone the right to possess whatever weapon he or she desired (it doesn't), we have since invented weapons that no civilian should be allowed to own. In fact, it can be easily argued that original intent of the Second Amendment had nothing to do with the right of self-defense—which remains the ethical case to be made for owning a firearm. The amendment seems to have been written to allow the states to check the power of the federal government by maintaining their militias. 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.

We could do many things to ensure that only fully vetted people could get a licensed firearm. The fact that guns in the U.S. can be legally purchased from private sellers without background checks on the buyers (the so-called "gun show loophole") is terrifying. Getting a gun license could be made as difficult as getting a license to fly an airplane, requiring dozens of hours of training. I would certainly be happy to see policy changes like this. In that respect, I support much stricter gun laws. But I am under no illusions that such restrictions would make it difficult for bad people to acquire guns illegally. Given the level of violence in our society, the ubiquity of guns, and the fact that our penitentiaries function like graduate schools for violent criminals, I think sane, law-abiding people should have access to guns. In that respect, I support the rights of gun owners.

Finally, I have said nothing here about what might cause a person like Adam Lanza to enter a school for the purpose of slaughtering innocent children. Clearly, we need more resources in the areas of childhood and teenage mental health, and we need protocols for parents, teachers, and fellow students to follow when a young man in their midst begins to worry them. In the majority of cases, someone planning a public assassination or a mass murder will communicate his intentions to others in advance of the crime. People need to feel personally responsible for acting on this information?and the authorities must be able to do something once the information gets passed along. But again, any law that allows us to commit or imprison people on the basis of a mere perception of risk would guarantee that large numbers of innocent people will be held against their will.

Rather than new laws, I believe we need a general shift in our attitude toward public violence?wherein everyone begins to assume some responsibility for containing it. It is worth noting that this shift has already occurred in one area of our lives, without anyone?s having received special training or even agreeing that a change in attitude was necessary: Just imagine how a few men with box cutters would now be greeted by their fellow passengers at 30,000 feet.

Perhaps we can find the same resolve on the ground.

#### **Related Article:**

[FAQ on Violence](#)

## **Notes**

1. The importance of storing and handling firearms safely, and of never growing complacent about this, is impossible to exaggerate. In 2010, 606 people died in accidental shootings, 62 of them children. But deadly risks are everywhere: Six times as many people accidentally drown each year (in non-boating-related incidents), and 700 of them are children?this is in a country where 47 percent of homes have guns. There is no question that putting a pool in your yard is as serious a decision as buying a gun. This is another point about which ?gun nuts? happen to be correct.
- According to one source cited by Goldberg, concealed-carry permit holders not only commit fewer crimes than members of the general public--they commit fewer crimes than *police officers*. It is certainly possible that in states with stringent requirements, civilians who take the trouble to go through the permitting process will be an unusually scrupulous bunch. Eight million people have been issued concealed-carry permits in the United States. But many more gun owners carry illegally, or legally in states that do not require permits (Gallup reports that 12 percent of Americans say they sometimes carry a gun for self-defense.)
  - Although Adam Lanza seems to have been the prototypical mass shooter?white, male, mentally unstable, and living outside a large city?the epidemic of gun crime in America is, in part, the product of urban gang activity. The black community continues to commit and to suffer more than its fair share of this violence. According to the Children?s Defense Fund, gun deaths among white children and teens have decreased by 44 percent over the past three decades, while deaths among black children and teens increased by 30 percent. Blacks account for only 15 percent of the youth population but suffer 45 percent of all child and teen gun deaths. Black males aged 15 to 19 are eight times as likely as their white peers, and two-and-a-half-times as likely as Hispanics, to die by a bullet.

The problem of gangs is distinct from the problem of guns. Gang membership answers to a variety of social

needs?protection and status foremost among them. But, as is the case with many social problems, gangs answer to a need that they themselves create. A person?s reputation within a gang depends upon his demonstrated willingness to harm outsiders. Therefore, the very norms by which one raises one?s status within a gang makes gang membership necessary for personal safety. Needless to say, most of the resulting mayhem is accomplished with guns. (Note 1/15/13: However, it would seem that, nationwide, only 12 percent of homicides are gang-related.)

Our misguided war on drugs is surely an important factor where gangs are concerned. This is another vicious circle: Like Prohibition before it, the war on drugs renders the sale of illicit drugs extraordinarily profitable while requiring that drug dealers function outside the law, protecting their investment and turf with guns. If we ended our war on drugs, the money that finances most gang activity would disappear, as would one of the primary reasons for gang violence. No doubt, gangs would remain, along with the other sources of violent crime. But with the war on drugs abandoned, our police, courts, and departments of corrections could focus on the real problem of violence.

- [Added 1/4/13] In fact, a revolver can be reloaded even faster than that.
- Of course, in many situations, even the best-trained guard would have no chance to draw his gun defensively, or would be unwise to do so. Picture the President of the United States moving through a crowd or delivering a speech: In the event of an assassination attempt, the job of his security detail is to immediately disrupt the shooter?s aim, bring him to the ground, and disarm him?and to get the president to safety. Drawing their weapons and returning fire, especially in a crowd, is not part of the plan. But the tactics appropriate to having a dozen guards protecting a high-risk target in a crowd do not extend to every situation involving an active shooter. And one can easily think of circumstances in which members of the Secret Service would need their guns.  
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