

If lawful firearm owners cause most gun deaths, what can we do?

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By [Philip Alpers](#)

Adjunct Associate Professor

[Sydney School of Public Health](#)

University of Sydney

In the frustrating struggle to identify gun killers in advance, we could have been looking in the wrong place. By accepting the common mantra that law-abiding, licensed firearm owners are [not the problem](#), many have chased popular fears such as [mental illness](#) and [violent video games](#).

Research now shows that far more frequently, perpetrators share one common thread. In [mass shootings](#), in gun homicide and particularly in much more common gun deaths, the killer is frequently, until that moment, a law-abiding firearm owner pulling the trigger on a [lawfully held gun](#).

In the 16 deadliest mass shootings in Europe between 1987 and 2015, 86% of the victims were shot by a [licensed shooter](#). In at least 29 American mass gun killings since 2007, 139 people were killed by [licensed firearm owners](#) with hidden handgun permits.

In 16 mass shootings in Australia and New Zealand between 1987 and 2014, 135 people died. Most of the victims – 55% – were shot by previously law-abiding, [licensed gun owners](#) using legally held firearms.

It's hard to imagine a motorists' lobby group insisting that licensed drivers should be left alone on the roads, and that the problem is unlicensed drivers. Yet gun owners have been [making this claim](#) for decades.

This begs the question: are licensed gun owners automatically good citizens? As with licensed motorists, the evidence says no.

Pulling the trigger

Mass shootings are far and away the rarest of firearm-related deaths. The global toll of [197,000 gun homicides](#) each year is made up mainly of single shootings – “non-conflict” deaths that occur during interpersonal disputes between familiar people, such as domestic violence and gang shootings.

Very few researchers break down these data. But where studies have been published, even in a count of “everyday” gun homicide, previously law-abiding shooters are frequently the killers.

Of the firearms seized from Canadians who were violent, had threatened violence, or were subject to a prohibition order, [43% were registered](#) to licensed gun owners. In New Zealand, half the perpetrators in both [non-fatal](#) firearm-related domestic disputes and in [gun homicide](#) have been licensed gun owners.

In [15% of homicidal shootings](#) in England and Wales, the firearms were legally held by the perpetrator. In Australia, a licensed firearm owner was the killer in [9.4%](#) to [21%](#) of gun homicides [each year](#). In South Africa, [one murdered woman in five](#) is killed with a legally owned gun.

Around the world, first responders are in no doubt of the dangers, especially in callouts to domestic violence. [According to](#) an Australian police union:

“Since 2000, half the police gunned down in the line of duty were killed by licensed firearms owners.”

As with any research, it's true that in other periods and populations the figures might have been lower or higher. This is particularly so in the US, where the global norms of gun owner licensing and firearm registration are [seldom observed](#) and almost any adult non-felon can [lawfully own](#) uncounted firearms.

Researchers rarely tally the legal status of guns fired. Without consistent studies to establish an accurate average, we're left with what we've got.

We do know that, in the US, licensing many more millions of Americans to carry hidden handguns – “concealed carry weapons” – is a [major focus](#) of the gun lobby. But in the past eight years alone, American gun owners lawfully entitled to carry hidden handguns are known to have killed [at least 750 people](#), including [17 law enforcement officers](#), in shootings not ruled to be self-defence. As some US states also legislate to conceal the data, these figures are conservative.

Origins of crime guns

The role of licensed gun owners and dealers also looms large in the origin of crime guns. In [Mexico](#) and [Canada](#), guns traced from crime scenes were most commonly imported from licensed dealers and lawful gun owners in the US.

When Australian authorities traced firearms found in crime, the [majority](#) were found to have leaked from licensed gun owners and [rogue firearm dealers](#), either directly into the criminal black market or into the larger [“grey market”](#). Australian gun owners who neglected to register their firearms after the Port Arthur massacre in 1996 [created](#) this market.

Another staple of gun owner belief comes into play here: the [idea](#) that law-abiding people with firearms make us safer. Instead, evidence shows that women, children, and older adults are more likely to die by gunfire from a household gun (typically, legally acquired and possessed) than from illegal guns.

Certainly across the US – where there are more guns – there are many more violent deaths. As one of [several studies](#) from Harvard University [found](#):

“The consistency of findings across different populations, using different study designs, and by different researchers is striking. No credible evidence suggests otherwise.”

Researchers even [found](#) that in gun-owning Australian households:

“The statistics also suggest that it is more likely that all family members will shoot each other dead before any external aggressor is killed.”

Gun suicide

Finally, there is the elephant in the room: gun suicide. In industrialised nations, most firearm-related deaths have nothing to do with crime. Suicides make up [77%](#) of [gun deaths](#) in Australia. In the UK it is [70%](#). Even in the US, [63% of shooting deaths](#) are [self-inflicted](#).

Public health practitioners see suicides and homicides as almost equally preventable. But try telling a firearm owner that statistically, the person [most at risk](#) from a gun in the home is a member of their own family – from [suicide](#), unintentional gunshot or [domestic violence](#).

Do most firearms used in suicide belong to law-abiding gun owners? We can't be sure – the research hasn't been done. Perhaps the result is so self-evident that we don't ask the question. If the answer is yes, then licensed gun owners are also mainly responsible for the largest of all categories of firearm-related death.

What can we do?

As [highlighted](#) recently in the UK, “chaotic” firearm owner licensing standards are sometimes “inexcusably compromising public safety”. In almost all countries, the legal knowledge and hands-on training (if any) necessary to own a firearm is minimal compared to the tests and proven road skills required for even an entry-level licence to drive a car.

Both guns and cars are symbols of masculinity and freedom, so we have good precedent for improvement. Decades of success in lowering the road toll (led by the US) point the way: uniform, stringent licensing of the person, plus registration of the agent of harm work in tandem to substantially lower the risk to public safety.

Undoubtedly it is true that almost all guns (and cars) lawfully registered to licensed owners will rust away harmlessly, never having been used in a death. The great majority of their owners will not commit serious violent crime.

But from a public health perspective, we should not downplay the significant contribution to early mortality posed by previously law-abiding gun owners who, in the heat of the moment, decide to kill.

[Philip Alpers](#) is founding director of [GunPolicy.org](#), a global project of the University of Sydney's [School of Public Health](#) which compares armed violence, firearm injury prevention and gun law across 350 jurisdictions world-wide.