

An Australian gun expert critiques America: You've lost control

[Washington Post](#)

Opinion

10 December 2015

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(REUTERS/Jason Miczek)

Although we foreigners can offer no immediate solution to America's gun infestation, we can see how you lost control of the plague of armed violence. Outsiders are also perplexed to see that you've done so little to grant your citizens a basic human right — the freedom to live without fear of death by gunshot.

Historically, there's little mystery as to how it began. The early laws of each European empire relied on two pillars of gun safety: Firearm owners were obliged to apply for a license and then to register each firearm, just as we do with cars. Because these restrictions were copied to hundreds of colonies, [almost all nations](#) now rely on universal licensing and registration to regulate firearms. Except America.

Even as America rejected British rule and charted its own brave course, your Founding Fathers and settlers often did more to control firearms than you do today. In [Dodge City](#), Kan.; [Tombstone](#), Ariz.; New York; and Chicago — to name just a few — stringent gun controls were commonly imposed. But since then, interest groups have bullied politicians into allowing unlicensed, unquantified gun ownership. The United States is [now alone](#) with its Second Amendment and almost alone in regulating [assault weapons](#) and [handguns](#) with such laxity.

Today, the Congressional Research Service estimates that U.S. residents collectively own [310 million private guns](#). That's just a guess, and it's [probably overblown](#). But here lies the problem: You can't even gauge the details of America's 30,000-deaths-a-year epidemic of

gun violence, let alone work out how best to save lives, while the gun lobby in Congress systematically [crushes attempts at research](#).

Most developed countries have already moved to reduce gun-fueled mayhem. The [Great Britain](#), [Argentina](#) and [Brazil](#) all mounted massive national gun buybacks to reduce the availability of firearms. The world's largest occurred in [Australia](#), where [a million of its guns](#) — one-third of the nation's private arsenal — were destroyed after a [spate of gun massacres](#) that claimed 100 lives.

Despite a subsequent [shooters' buying spree](#) that has replaced confiscated semi-automatic weapons with new single-shot long guns, the per-capita rate of firearm ownership remains 23 percent [lower than it was](#) 20 years ago. The risk of dying by gunshot in Australia [fell by more than half](#), and stayed there. Research found [no evidence of substitution](#) to other weapons or means of violent death.

When presidential candidate Hillary Clinton [recently agreed](#) that Australia's gun safety measures are "[worth considering](#)," was she suggesting the unthinkable — gun confiscation in the United States? "[Of course not](#)," her spokeswoman swiftly said.

But that's disingenuous. When a government bans a particularly dangerous type of firearm, then offers to buy those guns under threat of prosecution, that is of course confiscation and destruction of private property. Yet John Howard, Australia's most conservative prime minister in decades, was just one leader of a large democracy who [achieved just that](#). Australia's 10-year spate of public mass shootings came to a sudden stop, and in almost two decades, we haven't suffered another.

To public health practitioners, the gun is to gun violence as the mosquito is to malaria. Break the chain of causation, and the disease begins to retreat. But when guns proliferate, a harm agent designed to kill drives an infectious disease fueled by fear and profit. The more Americans die by gunshot, the [more Americans purchase guns](#).

Successive [U.S. surgeons general](#) have rightly described America's scourge of [30,000 gun deaths](#) each year as an "[epidemic](#)" and a "[preventable health problem](#)." Yet the number of U.S. researchers dedicated to this field across all academic disciplines is [as few as a dozen](#). Each year, Congress [chokes federal funding](#) to ensure that this remains the case.

All this from a great nation that has led the world in public health interventions to save millions of lives. Both cars and guns are symbols of freedom and masculinity, yet Americans slashed road deaths by applying a holistic suite of public safety measures. You saved countless billions of taxpayer dollars by reducing the health cost of tobacco-related disease and HIV/AIDS.

As with guns, these public safety measures faced intense initial opposition, fueled by personal views on morality, religion, individual freedom and dislike of government. One day, as more and more Americans die, you'll be left with little option but to bite the bullet and curb gun deaths by following the evidence.

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