Good gun policy needs research

The tragic shooting at a school in Parkland, Florida, last month triggered another round of proposals from local, state, and federal policymakers about controlling firearm-related violence without violating broad interpretations of the rights to keep and bear arms provided by the U.S. Constitution. Unfortunately, there is only very sparse scientific evidence that can help figure out which policies will be effective. Earlier this month, the RAND Corporation released a comprehensive analysis on gun policy in the United States,* and among its conclusions is that too few policies and outcomes have been the subject of rigorous scientific investigation. Even the seemingly popular view that violent crime would be reduced by laws prohibiting the purchase or possession of guns by individuals with mental illness was deemed to have only moderate supporting evidence. If the nation is serious about getting firearm-related violence under control, it must rise above its aversion to providing financial support for firearm-related research, and the scientific community will have to expeditiously carry out the needed research.

There used to be more federally funded research on firearm-related violence than there is now. Although its program was small relative to other public health issues, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) did support research on firearm violence through its National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. However, the 1996 “Dickey Amendment” prohibited the CDC from funding activities that promoted or advocated for gun control. Although some research might still have been considered acceptable, the amendment was interpreted as an outright prohibition of CDC support for any gun violence research. In 2011, Congress enacted similar restrictions affecting the Department of Health and Human Services, resulting in a dearth of scientific activity on any aspect of the availability and possession of firearms and the violence that might be related to them.

In 2013, shortly after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Connecticut, President Obama issued a series of Executive Orders directing federal science agencies to again support research on firearm-related violence. In response, the CDC and the CDC Foundation asked the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the National Research Council (NRC) (now part of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine) to draw up a public health research agenda that the CDC might implement. One of us (A.I.L.) chaired the committee that produced the resulting consensus report and research agenda.† Unfortunately, nothing came of it, because although CDC has occasionally requested funds to support relevant research, Congress consistently has said “no.” The National Institutes of Health also supported relevant research beginning in 2013, but that program was discontinued in 2017 as other priorities replaced it.

It’s time to stop the polarized “debates” that lack a science base and turn our energies toward constructive, informed examination. The IOM-NRC report has spelled out a research path that calls for a closer examination of the characteristics of firearm-related violence; the risk and protective factors (like growing up in violence-prone environments) that increase the probability of firearm violence; the effectiveness of diverse violence prevention and other interventions; and the impact of various gun safety technologies. And the RAND analysis calls for research on the effects of specific firearm policies, such as whether background checks that investigate all types of mental health histories do reduce gun injuries, suicides, and homicides and whether raising the minimum age for purchasing firearms (to 21 years old) reduces firearm suicides among youth.

Without science to drive firearm policy development and implementation, we risk inventing policies based on personal ideology or intuition. If we are serious that gun violence is a major public threat, then let’s rise to the moment and take the next science-based steps.

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*www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2088.html; †https://doi.org/10.17226/18319

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