

**THE GUN POLICY DEBATE MUST BE ABOUT
MORE THAN GOOD GUYS VS. BAD GUYS**

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Gun policy discussions in the United States have been oversimplified into dichotomies such as an either-or choice between “good guys” and “bad guys.” Positions are taken, and decisions are made, on the pretense that the world can always be divided into two groups. There is a widespread us-versus-them mentality when it comes to gun policy: gun owners vs. non-owners, gun advocates vs. gun grabbers, law-abiding citizens vs. criminals. You are either pro-gun or anti-gun and there is little in between.

This dichotomous, or “black-and-white,” thinking is a common and often helpful way for people to organize difficult aspects of our reality. It makes complex issues simple and decision making easier. The problem, however, is that it often discards vital aspects of an issue in pursuit of simplicity. It also keeps us unaware of all the potential solutions to a problem. Put simply, it is a poor way to resolve any policy issue in a pluralistic society like the United States.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Many people involved in our gun policy debate keep this “good” vs. “bad” mindset alive. Lobbyists, pundits, researchers, and politicians often reduce the discussion to an either-or choice.

Some research claims shootings and deaths are caused by “bad guys”—criminals or self-destructive individuals, not regular people. One statistical analysis of gun policy divides our population into two groups: potential criminals and potential victims. Another analysis proposes the sole benefit of owning a gun is reducing one’s chance of being assaulted, with the only risks being an increased likelihood of suicide or gun accident. In suicide, the dichotomous mindset claims there are two types of people who attempt suicide – those who really want to die, and those who don’t.

Politicians claim criminals don’t abide by any laws so any restriction on gun availability does nothing but keep good people from protecting their families.

WHY IS THIS ISSUE IMPORTANT?

This oversimplification of the issue is limiting our ability to settle on effective, substantive gun policies. In most other policy areas in the United States, we’ve avoided such an oversimplified view.

For example, most motor vehicle deaths are related to unlawful behavior like speeding, drunk driving, texting, and running red lights. As a society, we have been able to dramatically reduce motor vehicle deaths per mile driven, not by changing driving behavior, but by making cars and roads safer. Policy makers originally blamed the “nut behind the wheel” but effective policies began to be made when they focused on how cars and roads could be made safer.

Similarly, we aim to design subway systems, schools and housing projects that are as free from violence as possible. We do this without the oversimplified discussion of whether we’re blaming the subway, school, or housing or the “bad guys” who commit violence.

Far more often than not, simplifying an issue into two choices proves to be misleading and dangerous. Our world is not bipolar. It is continuous. A policy discussion about guns that is framed as simply “good” versus “bad” prevents any meaningful debate from happening. A deeper, broader discussion of the issue is needed to develop policies and reduce gun violence.

WHAT LINE DIVIDES “GOOD” FROM “BAD”?

Since there’s no certain, obvious way to distinguish “good” people from “bad” people, where should gun policy draw the line concerning who is legally able to obtain, carry, and use a firearm? We have not adequately discussed this question.

Should individuals with violent misdemeanor convictions be allowed to own and carry firearms? Should police chiefs whose officers have responded to multiple 911 calls to the home of an individual known to be violent have the discretion to deny him a concealed carry permit? A strong case can be made that the line we have drawn for who can legally have a guns is too close to the “bad guy.”

For example, a study found that although the vast majority of homicide perpetrators in Chicago have long arrest records, most do not have felony convictions, meaning they probably could have passed a Brady background check. Another study found that 60% of inmates in state prisons for gun offenses could have passed a National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) review the moment before their most recent arrest. Yet most of the individuals in both studies were well known to the criminal justice system.

Although there are some extremely violent individuals in our society, most gun killings—especially if we include gun accidents and suicides—are done by people who are not obvious “bad guys.” Even for gun homicides alone, a NICS background check—the current cut-off for flagging people who pose the highest risk—fails to identify most eventual perpetrators.

EXPAND THE DISCUSSION

Of course, most of the real discussions should not focus on good and not-so-good individuals, but what can various individuals and institutions can do to reduce the violence – what can gun manufacturers, gun dealers, gun trainers, gun owners, foundations, faith communities, hospitals, women’s groups, and many others do? Until we have that serious discussion, we may never come close to achieving our society’s potential for gun violence prevention.