

RBG: Restrict Bullets, not Guns

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Americans are increasingly concerned about firearm deaths in the United States. Polling shows overwhelming support for a variety of laws to restrict the availability of guns. An editorial in the Washington Post in September 2019, listed 36 mass shootings since Columbine High School in 1999.

The public dialog has shown little concern for the scope of the problems related to firearm injuries and deaths. A systematic inquiry into these issues would concern itself with the stocks and flows of both guns and bullets, as well as the difficulties and limitations of governmental activity involving guns and the very large numbers of individuals involved.

Premise: Firearm violence takes place where (a) guns and (b) bullets can be obtained by (c) people.

First, some facts. Our population was 323.4 million in 2016. That year American and foreign manufacturers added 16,258,394 guns to our supply: 48.5% were handguns, 44.3% were long guns, and 7.25% were “other.” But we already had about 393 million guns here. We now have five guns for every four Americans.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) published data showing 38,658 gun deaths for 2016, including suicides as well as unintentional deaths. That’s more than one death every fifteen minutes. The FBI reports there were 15,070 homicides in America in 2016. There were 11,004 (73%) people killed by firearms; sixty-five percent (7,105) were by handguns.

The Economist notes that guns account for half of all suicides, and suicides outnumber homicides by two to one. And the suicide rate in the US is up 18% since 2000; worldwide, the rate is down 29%.

The 36 mass shootings listed by the Washington Post totaled only 466 deaths over twenty years, leaving hundreds of thousands of deaths from less reported events, all rooted in the ubiquitous availability of firearms.

Bullets are responsible for almost all of the fatalities; an NIH study found that from 1993 – 1996, only about 7630 people were treated in emergency rooms for being struck by a gun, out of 413,186 incidents of non-fatal firearm injuries. That’s less than 0.02%.

Many of the recent Congressional actions on firearm violence have been centered on restricting access to firearms by those who are unstable, troubled as observed by relatives or neighbors, or previously convicted of related or unrelated offenses. Limited resources (Ashby’s Law of Requisite Variety) will always limit the effectiveness of such governmental action.

What tools does our government (or any government) have to address these issues? Here we turn to The Tools of Government, by Lester Salamon (second edition, 2002). Dr. Salamon taught at Johns Hopkins University for many years. His textbook contains a lengthy list of actions that governments can and do take. It includes some of the criteria for choosing among the tools, as well as some tool dimensions. The tools are:

Direct Government

Government Corporations and Government-Sponsored Enterprises

Economic Regulation

Social Regulation
Government Insurance
Public Information
Corrective Taxes, Charges, and Tradable Permits
Contracting
Purchase-of-Service Contracting
Grants
Loans and Loan Guarantees
Tax Expenditures
Vouchers
Tort Liability

Dr. Salamon's list of tools may not be complete today. We now see the frequent use of prize competitions, and we know about Cass Sunstein's nudges, neither of which are discussed in the book. His fourteen categories still offer a wonderful starting point for discussions of societal problem solving.

When choosing a tool, we need to evaluate its effectiveness, efficiency, equity, manageability, and political legitimacy. When looking at a possible tool, we need to examine its degrees of coerciveness, directness, automaticity, and visibility.

It's estimated that Americans buy at least 12 billion rounds of ammunition annually. Taxing bullets at the point of sale, a corrective tax, would be effective, efficient, and very manageable. Taxation would be coercive, direct, and automatic.

Taxing guns or taxing bullets could be very effective. Taxing cigarettes has led to a substantial decline in smoking, and taxing alcoholic beverages reduces their consumption

In fact, guns and bullets are already taxed. The Firearms and Ammunition Excise Tax (FAET) was created in 1919, and is now collected by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Handguns are taxed at 10%, and long guns and ammunition are taxed at 11%. The money goes to the Department of the Interior. In 2018 alone, \$797 million were sent to the states and territories, to be distributed for wildlife preservation. Not one dollar went to emergency rooms, police departments, funeral parlors, or the families of those lost to gun violence.

Taxing ammunition has been tried in recent years, both in Sacramento, California and in Chicago/Cook County, Illinois. In both cases, people simply left these jurisdictions to buy ammunition. To be effective, such a tax would have to be national in scope. Still to be determined: the level of taxation and its applicability to various types of rounds.

In comparison, the size of the stock of firearms in America and their protection under the Second Amendment limit the choices and effectiveness of government actions. Likewise, the size of the American population limits how well governments can hope to monitor their actions and mental states.

Conclusion: Although the stock of ammunition is substantial, bullets are a consumable – their flow is immense. Raising taxes on ammunition would appear to be America's best bet for reducing our death rate from firearms, already the world's highest by far.