

The Vector Poll™

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The U.S. has more mass shootings than any nation, but it may have found a way to prevent them

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Would you shoot someone?

Why not? It's not because you're afraid of getting caught or serving jail time.

You wouldn't because it's wrong, not because it's illegal. As the ancient Roman poet Horace said, laws without morals are useless.

Yet many Canadians feel banning handguns will make them safer. Appeals for handgun bans grew louder after the shooting deaths of a teenager and a 10-year-old amid the shops and bistros of Toronto's busy Danforth Avenue in July.

Canadians, however, are ambivalent about handgun bans. They embrace a gun ban as a way to do something but also think a ban wouldn't work.

In a Forum Research poll the week after the shootings, 50% of Toronto residents said banning handguns would reduce gun violence in the city. But only 18% said a ban would reduce it "a lot" while 32% said "somewhat." Another 38% said a ban wouldn't reduce gun violence a lot or at all.

In an Ipsos poll the same week, 84% of Toronto residents said laws "that would further restrict the sale of guns" would be effective "at reducing gun violence in Toronto." But only 54% said very effective while 30% said somewhat.

Canadians outside Toronto support a handgun ban. In an EKOS Research poll in November last year, 69% across the country favoured "a strict ban on guns in urban areas." In late August a national Nanos Research poll found 48% supported "a total ban on handgun ownership by anyone other than police and other security." Another 19% "somewhat" supported it.

Canadians want to do something. But offered only the choice between banning guns or doing nothing, they grasp the ban. Gun violence undermines Canadians' self-image as a peaceful society.

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- According to the Gallup Poll in 2017, Canadians are among the most likely people in the world to feel safe “walking alone at night” in the city or area where they live.

Toronto mayor John Tory wants the federal government to ban handguns in cities, reversing his stand when he ran for mayor in 2014. One of his 2014 opponents, former MP Olivia Chow, supported a federal handgun ban. “What Ms. Chow doesn’t seem to understand,” Tory said then, “is that criminals and gang members don’t obey the law. Calling for such a ban isn’t leadership. It’s an empty gesture.”

A handgun ban would require confiscating many of the estimated 12 million legal, restricted and prohibited firearms in Canadians’ hands.

Another problem with an urban gun ban is geography: a firearm that’s illegal on one side of the road could be lawful across the street.

Why limit a handgun ban to cities? Gun crime is not just an urban problem. According to Statistics Canada, in 2016 in rural areas there were 30 victims of firearm-related violent crimes for every 100,000 residents compared with 25 per 100,000 residents in urban areas.

A handgun ban will be ineffective when the day comes that gun enthusiasts are able to make a firearm on a 3D printer with instructions they download on the internet.

Every mass shooting brings appeals to ban some types of guns, hire more police, toughen background checks on gun buyers, install more surveillance cameras and increase jail sentences for shooters. And deal with the root causes of gun crime. The problem is that no one knows the root causes.

After the shootings on Toronto’s Danforth Avenue, city councillor Joe Cressy called gun violence a symptom of poverty. Blaming poverty, unemployment or mental illness demeans and stereotypes low-income people and those struggling with mental health issues.

The Canadian Mental Health Association says, “In any given year, 1 in 5 people in Canada will personally experience a mental health problem or illness.” Can a handgun ban — or more police — protect us from 7 million people with mental health issues? Or from the 4.8 million who, according to Statistics Canada, live in poverty?

The mental health, unemployment and poverty explanations for gun violence “have been debunked by research,” *The New York Times* reported this year. According to the American Psychiatric Association mass shootings by people with a serious mental illness represent 1% of all gun homicides each year.

But the biggest reason a handgun ban will disappoint its proponents is Horace's misgiving about laws. Has banning ever ended what it intends to prohibit? Every misdemeanor or crime, from double-parking to murder, defies a ban. Why ban guns when you already ban shooting people?

Can anything reduce gun violence? Obviously a gun is useless without ammunition.

- Make bullets more expensive — much more — with an ammunition tax
- Require background checks on ammunition buyers (as the law requires for licenced gun owners)
- Prohibit mail-order sales of bullets
- Limit the amount of ammunition a person can buy
- Make ammunition sellers keep records of buyers and the bullets they purchase

Potential killers might make their own ammo anyway if they have the skill and patience to buy and cast copper, lead or brass (some websites for do-it-yourself bullets warn it's expensive, complicated and dangerous).

In the 1990's the U.S. Senate debated ammunition control to reduce gun violence. One senator said the wrong people can always get a gun, but they "have to come out of the woodwork to purchase ammunition."

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Marc Zwelling is the founder of the Vector Poll™ (www.vectorresearch.com) and author of *Public Opinion and Polling For Dummies* (Wiley, 2012).