

Gun Violence: The Real Costs

Philip J. Cook
Jens Ludwig

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Gun Violence

STUDIES IN CRIME AND PUBLIC POLICY
Michael Tonry and Norval Morris, *General Editors*

Police for the Future
David H. Bayley

Incapacitation: Penal Confinement and the Restraint of Crime
Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon Hawkins

The American Street Gang: Its Nature, Prevalence, and Control
Malcolm W. Klein

Sentencing Matters
Michael Tonry

The Habits of Legality: Criminal Justice and the Rule of Law
Francis A. Allen

Chinatown Gangs: Extortion, Enterprise, and Ethnicity
Ko-lin Chin

Responding to Troubled Youth
Cheryl L. Maxson and Malcolm W. Klein

Making Crime Pay: Law and Order in Contemporary American Politics
Katherine Beckett

Community Policing, Chicago Style
Wesley G. Skogan and Susan M. Hartnett

Crime Is Not the Problem: Lethal Violence in America
Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon Hawkins

Hate Crimes: Criminal Law & Identity Politics
James B. Jacobs and Kimberly Potter

Politics, Punishment, and Populism
Lord Windlesham

American Youth Violence
Franklin E. Zimring

Bad Kids: Race and the Transformation of the Juvenile Court
Barry C. Feld

Punishment, Communication, and Community
R. A. Duff

Punishment and Democracy: Three Strikes and You're Out in California
Franklin E. Zimring, Gordon Hawkins, and Sam Kamin

Gun Violence: The Real Costs
Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig

Gun VIOLENCE

the real costs

Philip J. Cook
Jens Ludwig

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2000

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford New York
Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogotá Buenos Aires Calcutta
Cape Town Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul
Karachi Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai
Nairobi Paris São Paulo Shanghai Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Copyright © 2000 by Oxford University Press

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cook, Philip J., 1946–

Gun violence: the real costs / Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig.
p. cm — (Studies in crime and public policy)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-513793-0

1. Gun control—United States—Costs.
2. Violent crimes—United States—Prevention.
I. Ludwig, Jens. II. Title. III. Series.

HV7436.C663 2000

364.15'0973—dc21 00-028556

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

For Cammie and Brian

P.J.C.

For Almuth, Gunter, Abi, and Liz.

J.L.

This page intentionally left blank

Preface

The urge to put a dollar value on life and limb comes naturally to economists. To normal people, however, this may seem unnecessary and even a bit perverse. What's the point? In particular, they may question why we have gone to the trouble of writing an entire book that tries to measure the effect of gunshot injuries and deaths on our standard of living. Just how is it helpful to translate fear, pain, disability, and early death into the same metric as we ordinarily use in measuring the consumption of food, shelter, and transportation?

We have two answers. The first is that putting a monetary value on gun violence is useful in laying claim to public attention. If gun violence is to “compete” effectively in the public forum with other problems—highway deaths, breast cancer, air pollution, failing schools—then gun violence needs a dollar-cost number, simply because such numbers have become a standard item in policy discourse. Our estimate, that gun violence costs something on the order of \$100 billion each year, turns out to be large enough to support a case for greater attention and effort.

Our second answer is more substantive. In conducting our research for this project, we have found that the economic-cost framework provides a different and more useful understanding of the problem than does the usual array of public-health statistics. Reporting 30,000 deaths and 80,000 serious injuries places the focus on the victims and may lead to an assessment of how “they” are different from the rest of us. It is all too easy to discount the suicides as mentally ill, the assault victims as

careless or worse. But viewed from the economic perspective, the focus becomes far wider, encompassing not just actual victims, but potential victims and those who are linked to those potential victims by family, friendship, or finances. In short, most all of us bear some part of the costs of gun violence, in myriad ways: waiting in line to pass through airport security; buying a transparent book bag for school aged children to meet their school's post-Columbine regulations; paying taxes for the protection of public officials, for urban renewal projects in areas devastated by gun violence, for subsidizing an urban trauma center; living in fear that one's children may be injured by a stray bullet or that a despondent relative would get her hands on a gun. And no one is entirely safe from becoming a victim themselves.

The goal is thus to document how gun violence reduces the quality of life for everyone in America. Recasting the problem in this way will, we hope, help inform the "Great American Gun War" to take us past symbolic politics to a direct engagement with the costs and benefits of alternative policies. This shift in emphasis helps focus sustained attention on those interventions that hold promise for reducing gun violence and may pay for themselves.

We can briefly outline the presentation. Chapter 1 provides a broad overview of our main arguments and conclusions, while subsequent chapters develop these points in greater detail. Chapter 2 describes statistical patterns of gun violence in America. Assaults and unintentional shootings are concentrated among young Hispanics and especially African Americans, while suicide rates tend to increase in late middle age and be higher for whites than minorities. All types of gun violence fall disproportionately on the poor and overwhelmingly on males rather than females, but no group is entirely spared.

Of course, guns are not the only instruments of violence; other weapons account for a third of homicides and 40% of suicides. But our focus remains on guns so as to provide a basis for evaluating the array of policy measures that are targeted on reducing gun use in violence, rather than in reducing overall

rates of violence. It is, in fact, the use of guns in violent crime that makes America unique among industrialized nations. As we document in Chapter 3, greater use of guns makes the problem of violence worse in America because guns are more lethal than the other weapons typically used in assaults and suicide attempts. The implication is that separating guns from violence saves lives.

Chapter 4 provides an accounting framework for monetizing the benefits of reducing gun violence. This is not a straightforward exercise, and the literature includes a variety of methods. In order to understand the different ways in which gun violence reduces the quality of life in America, we offer the image of a “vaccine” that would reduce the threat of gunshot injury; tracing through all of the ways in which the public would benefit helps highlight a number of costs that have been ignored in previous studies of this topic. There would be less need for investments in prevention, avoidance, and harm reduction, both public and private, and less concern about being shot or losing a loved one or a neighbor to gunfire.

The traditional “Cost of Illness” framework used by public health researchers directs our attention to the medical costs and lost productivity associated with gunshot injuries. We look into these matters in Chapters 5 and 6, finding that these costs, while large in some absolute sense, are smaller than previous studies suggest and constitute only a modest share of the overall burden.

The greater costs of gun violence stem from the fact that all of us must live with the risk that we or someone we care about will be injured by gunfire. Chapter 7 lists some of the ways in which private citizens, businesses, and government agencies attempt to reduce the risk of gunshot injury. While we cannot quantify most of these adaptations, we show that they are likely to cost at least \$5–10 billion per year, and probably far more.

To obtain a more comprehensive measure of costs, both subjective and tangible, we turn to a “contingent-valuation” survey that asks respondents what they would pay to reduce gun assaults. The results, presented in Chapter 8, suggest that the

elimination of gun use in assault would be worth at least \$80 billion per year. Elimination of unintentional shootings and gun suicides would be worth another \$10–20 billion.

Chapter 9 then turns to a discussion of remedies. A variety of interventions hold promise for reducing misuse of guns, including traditional gun control measures (screening and registering buyers, prohibiting ownership by teenagers and felons), requiring gun manufacturers to incorporate safety features in their products, policing against illegal carrying, and threatening those who use guns in crime with longer prison sentences. The potential benefits of several such interventions, estimated using the results from previous chapters, are compared with estimated costs. Since some of these interventions arguably produce benefits in excess of costs, increasing their scope or intensity improves the overall standard of living in America.

Gun violence is a public health problem and a moral problem, but it is also a quality-of-life issue for all of us. We hope that the perspective offered in this book will provide some leverage in moving the policy debate toward a more reasoned response.

Durham, North Carolina
Washington, D.C.
July 2000

P. J. C.
J. L.

Acknowledgments

This book was made possible by a grant from the Joyce Foundation of Chicago and was written in part while Ludwig was a visiting scholar at the Northwestern University/University of Chicago Joint Center for Poverty Research. Our thanks to both organizations, though of course the views expressed herein in no way reflect those of our funders.

We are also grateful to the dedicated members of the advisory board for this project, including Arlene Greenspan, Steve Hargarten, David Hemenway, Arthur Kellermann, Jim Mercy, Will Manning, John Mullahy, Terry Richmond, William Schwab, and Daniel Webster. The contributions of this group have substantially improved the quality of our book.

We offer special thanks to Ted Miller and Bruce Lawrence, who collaborated with us on our study of the medical costs of gun violence. The results of our collaboration are presented in Chapter 5 and Appendix B, parts of which have also been published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (vol. 282, No. 5 [August 4, 1999]: 447–54). They have also provided us with a number of calculations and very useful comments for the other chapters as well.

Michael Tonry, Steve Levitt, and Dedi Felman read the entire draft manuscript and made a number of very useful suggestions. Other valuable comments were provided to us by Jeffrey Conte, Ted Gayer, Joel Huber, Helen Ladd, Jonathan Mathieu, Harold Pollack, Kurt Schwabe, Kerry Smith, Jon Vernick, Elizabeth Richardson Vigdor, Garen Wintemute, Mona Wright, and seminar participants at the 1998 meetings of the American So-

ciety of Criminology, the 1999 meetings of the American Economic Association, Duke University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Access to the various data sources used in this book was facilitated by the generous assistance of Lee Annest, Mike DeVivo, Katherine Heck, Richard Linn, Ellen O'Brien, and Margaret Warner. We are also grateful to the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research and the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, particularly Steve Teret, Alma Kuby, and Tom Smith, for allowing us to include questions on their annual gun survey and working with us to develop the survey items themselves. The other members of our research team at Duke, Georgetown, and Northwestern universities—Christina Clark, Heath Einstein, Jessica Lucas, Bob Malme, Ike McFarlin, Josh Pinkston, Esperanza Ross, and Jennifer Sturiale—provided outstanding research assistance that went far beyond the call of duty.

Judy Cook and Elizabeth Scott displayed (nearly) endless patience during the writing of the book and provided us with much-needed support and good humor.

Finally, we owe a unique debt to our supporters at the Joyce Foundation. Roseanna Ander has been an unflagging source of ideas and enthusiasm; without her, the book would never have been finished. Of course, the book would never have begun without the encouragement of Debby Leff, at the time the president of the Joyce Foundation, and the inspiration of Mary O'Connell. Lore has it that Mary came up with the idea for a project on the costs of gun violence during a staff meeting at the Joyce Foundation's headquarters several years ago, in response to a question by Debby about what kind of research might really move gun policy forward in America. This book, then, is the ultimate result of Mary's idea, combined with the well-known natural law that no one says no to Debby Leff. For getting us started, and for their assistance throughout, we are enormously grateful to them both.

Contents

1	Gun Violence and Life in America	3
2	Victimization Risks	15
3	How Guns Matter	29
4	What Counts?	45
5	Medical Costs: Gross versus Net	63
6	The Mythical Importance of Productivity Losses	75
7	Avoidance and Prevention	85
8	Willingness-to-Pay to Reduce Gun Violence	97
9	Remedies	117
	Appendix A: Data Sources for Injury and Mortality Rates	135
	Appendix B: Computation of Net Medical Cost Estimates	149
	Appendix C: Computation of Productivity Losses	175

Appendix D: Computations of Contingent-Valuation
and Quality-of-Life Estimates 181

Notes 197

References 219

Index 235

Gun Violence

This page intentionally left blank

Gun Violence and Life in America

At 11:21 A.M. on April 20, 1999, 18-year-old Eric Harris and 17-year-old Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, from the back parking lot carrying two sawed-off shotguns, a Hi-Point semiautomatic rifle, and a 9 millimeter Tech DC 9 semi-automatic pistol with a high-capacity magazine.¹ The two students had earlier hidden at least 30 pipe bombs throughout the school for use in the attack² and had planted a 25-pound propane bomb in the school's kitchen.³ They then proceeded to open fire, shooting 35 people before the end of lunch hour. By three in the afternoon, local police had finally evacuated the building and started their search for the gunmen, both of whom were found in the school library, dead of self-inflicted gunshot wounds.⁴ Among the 13 other victims who died were 48-year-old Dave Sanders, a popular teacher who was shot twice in the chest while leading others to safety, and Daniel Rohrbough, a 15-year-old freshman who was shot while holding an exit door open for other students and was, as the *New York Times* reported, "last seen alive, running, screaming for his mother."⁵ The family of Lauren Townsend, a senior and member of the National Honor Society, received a letter offering her a college scholarship the day of her funeral.⁶

It is difficult to overstate the effects that this tragedy has had on the residents of Littleton. The Columbine High School students' lives and those of their friends and families will never be the same. And the shock wave from these shootings has reverberated throughout Colorado. The mother of a high school

student reports that up to that point, "I had total blind faith in the schools, but I am not going to play Russian roulette with her life. I just can't do it. She thinks about where she'd run and how she'd get out of her school if it happened to her. How do you study and concentrate like that?" Similar sentiments by other parents have led to a fourfold increase in the number of calls received by the Christian Home Educators of Colorado, a home-schooling organization.⁷

The Littleton shootings followed a string of similar, though more limited attacks by students at schools in Jonesboro, Arkansas (March 1998), West Paducah, Kentucky (December 1997), and Pearl, Mississippi (October 1997). They have touched parents and students across the country. After Littleton, one teacher in a Virginia public school with many low-income students noted, "It may be hard for so-called safe communities to accept the fact that their children can inflict as much mayhem as, and maybe more than, those from less privileged environments and to take the tough steps that schools like mine have learned are the price of protection."⁸

Metal detectors, security personnel, and other measures that had once been largely confined to big cities are now in schools across the country. Many principals and other school personnel spent the summer of 1999 worried primarily about student safety:

In dozens of locales as disparate as Pittsburgh and Palm Beach County, SWAT teams have spent the summer learning the layouts of high schools and conducting drills involving mock hostage-taking. Many students returning to school will find metal detectors and armed security guards at the doors, while others will have to trade their canvas backpacks for see-through bags designed to make it harder to conceal a weapon. . . . In Allen, Texas, a suburb of Dallas that cut back its class schedule last spring after a series of bomb threats, officials are spending \$1 million to bring in metal detectors, surveillance cameras and a new security force, and are requiring students to wear identification badges.⁹

The Lessons of Littleton

The Littleton tragedy highlights several lessons that are important for addressing the problem of gun violence in America. First is the key role of technology. There have been endless commentaries on what could possibly have driven Harris and Klebold, sons of prosperous families with seemingly bright futures, to plan and execute the mass killing of their classmates and teachers. The suggestions range from the sterility of life in upscale subdivisions to the violent fantasies encouraged by television and computer games to general societal permissiveness. Whatever the merits of these various perspectives, one feature of this attack cannot be ignored: Harris and Klebold, like the other student killers before them, used guns to accomplish their grim purpose. They also tried, unsuccessfully, to use bombs, but without guns, the enterprise would have been unthinkable.

Of course, guns are not necessary to perpetrate more ordinary violence, whether in schools or homes or on the street. Knives, fists, and clubs are far more common. The importance of guns in routine fights and robberies is that they intensify violence, increasing the likelihood of death. Because guns increase the scope and lethality of violence, keeping them away from violent encounters is a vital public goal. This goal is distinct from the goal of reducing overall violence rates. Gun-oriented policies, if they are successful, may save lives even if assault and robbery rates stay at current levels.

A second lesson is that the consequences of Littleton and the other school shootings extend well beyond the injuries and loss of life. These tragedies created a new arena for worry, a violent scenario that parents and principals everywhere could not ignore. The anguish of the victims and their families and friends was just the beginning—throughout America the emotional response to the shootings engendered a demand for prevention and protection efforts.

Third, in aggregate these efforts to repair the damage to peace of mind are not cheap. The effort to prevent subsequent shootings has greatly added to the costs of the shootings

themselves. That is, in assessing the comprehensive costs of gun violence in schools, we must include the direct burden created by the threat and the indirect burden on parents and children who are complying with the new rules, not to mention the taxpayers who are paying for the extra protection.

Fourth, in the costly pursuit of safety, it's possible to err on the side of "too much." While many schools responded to the Littleton shootings by substantially changing their security practices, others have rejected the use of metal detectors and similar measures as "an affront to educational openness."¹⁰ One superintendent from Massachusetts said "We don't want to create an image of a police state, and we don't want dogs sniffing around," while the Los Angeles public schools decided against screening every student because of the loss in class time that would result.¹¹ The trade-off appears in the private sector as well: As one bank president said, "you don't want to have so much security that you inconvenience your customers."¹²

Systematic evaluation of policies to reduce gun violence thus requires that the costs on both sides be weighed and compared. But it is more common in debates over gun-oriented policies that the two sides talk past each other. Consider, for example, the use of aggressive police patrols against illegal gun carrying in New York. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani supports these patrols, arguing that they may well have contributed to the reduction in gun crime in the city. Opponents such as the Reverend Al Sharpton argue that the patrols should be ended in light of the inconvenience to large numbers of innocent and predominantly minority citizens. But presumably most observers will synthesize the two arguments and recognize that police patrols against illegal gun carrying involve both benefits and costs. In the absence of more information about the relative importance of each, members of the public are left to form their own opinions on the basis of other things, such as which spokesperson has the less unpleasant personality.

A More Comprehensive Perspective

To the extent that data rather than rhetoric are brought to bear in public discourse on gun problems, they consist of counts of injuries and deaths, rather than broader measures of effects on society and standards of living. Of course the immediate damage guns do in assaults, homicides, unintentional shootings, and suicides, amounting to more than a million deaths since 1965 and about three times that number of injuries, cannot be denied. Indeed, in considering the potential benefits of sentencing enhancements for gun use in crime, a ban on particularly dangerous types of guns, or more stringent regulation of gun commerce, the first question must be whether that policy will save lives and increase public safety. But even if the answer is yes, then there remains a second, more subtle question—what is the value of this increase in public safety, and how does it compare with the costs of the program?

The first question is challenging enough and produces any number of skirmishes among analysts. A case in point concerns the consequences of putting more guns on the street by easing restrictions on carrying a concealed weapon. The claim that gun-toting citizens will deter homicidal assaults contends with the claim that more guns on the street will simply escalate the “arms race.” There is evidence on both sides, though in our judgment these policies have likely had little effect either way.

For other policies, such as sentencing enhancements for gun use in crime, the evidence of effectiveness is more clear cut. But knowing that a policy of this sort saves lives isn’t enough for setting public policy, given the considerable costs of increasing our society’s already high rate of incarceration.

The effort to place a value on increased safety expands the discussion. As in the Littleton example, the cost of gun violence is not limited to the immediate damage but has broad consequences for peace of mind, private investment in protection and avoidance, and the expenditure of tax revenues. With this broader perspective comes a surprising answer to the question of whose problem this is: While gun assaults and unintentional injuries are concentrated to a remarkable degree among a nar-

row demographic slice of the population—younger black or Hispanic men—the rest of the population is by no means immune. And in seeking to reduce our vulnerability, or paying our share of the public bill for responding to violence, the burden is widely shared.

This more comprehensive approach, defining gun violence as, in effect, a tax on our standard of living as well as a public health or crime issue, may help in the effort to create and sustain public attention on the problem. Too often, gun policies are adopted in response to highly publicized shootings.¹³ The tendency is to focus on preventing similar events in the future, rather than on those policies that hold the most promise for reducing gunshot injuries over the long run. For example, because some of the weapons used in the Columbine school shootings were obtained from a gun show, a number of proposals have been made to regulate gun sales at gun shows—even though only a very small share of teens and convicted criminals obtain their firearms from this source. Scarce public attention and government resources are thus diverted toward programs that have narrow scope. Documenting the ongoing shared costs of gun violence may provide a more broad-gauged perspective on policymaking.

The Benefits of Reducing Gun Violence

Can we assign a monetary value to a human life, or to the suffering of someone who has been paralyzed by a gunshot wound, or to the effects of such injuries on the lives of family and friends? As difficult and unpleasant as this task may seem, the fact is that the courts regularly place a price on life and limb in setting damages for personal-injury suits; more to the point, legislatures and regulatory agencies are routinely required to decide how much an increment in safety is worth. When Congress established a national speed limit of 55 in 1974, the highway fatality rate dropped dramatically.¹⁴ But much of the public, including the commercial trucking interests, eventually demanded a return to higher speed limits despite the likely

increase in fatalities that would result, and Congress complied. Individual consumers are also forced to make decisions in the face of what might be thought of as a “quantity-quality” trade-off for our lives. Should we spend extra to obtain a car with dual air bags or antilock breaks, or save the money for a cruise in the Bahamas? Is that job cleaning windows on the exterior of the Empire State Building worth the extra pay? Should we pay an extra \$10,000 to buy a house that is farther away from the local nuclear plant? And so forth.

To be clear, policymakers and private citizens are making judgments about the value of *ex ante* reductions in the risk of injury, before the identity of those who will be injured is known. While most people would give up much of their net worth to save themselves or a loved one from certain death, their willingness to pay for small reductions in the risk of death is more limited. It is the summation of what people will pay for small reductions in the probability of death that defines what is known as the “value of a statistical life,” with values defined similarly for statistical injuries and other health hazards. If each person in a community of 100,000 is willing to pay \$50 to reduce the number of injury deaths in that community by one per year, then the value of a statistical life to these residents equals \$5 million.

What people will pay to reduce the risk of gunshot injury will presumably depend on how it affects them, their families, and their communities. Sometimes the monetary value of greater safety comes right off a spreadsheet. For example, the sharp declines in the rate of violent crime during the 1990s have brought windfall gains in property values to many property owners in urban neighborhoods. But most of what’s at stake here are intangible commodities not traded in the marketplace—freedom from the threat of gun violence, relief from the necessity of taking steps to reduce the threat.

The most straightforward way to determine what people will pay to reduce gun violence is to ask them. When 1,200 American adults were asked such a question in 1998 by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, the average household was willing to pay around \$240 per year

to reduce gun crime by 30% in their community. Multiplying by the total number of households in the United States implies that a 30% reduction in gun assaults is worth nearly \$24 billion, or approximately \$1 million per gunshot injury. Extrapolating from that, we find the total cost of gunshot injuries from crime is about \$80 billion per year.

Many economists (and other people as well) are understandably dubious about how seriously to take responses to surveys, particularly when they relate to what respondents would hypothetically be willing to pay for government programs (rather than for items with which they may have more direct knowledge). Nevertheless, the results of this survey imply a value per statistical life that is remarkably consistent with those derived from studies of actual behavior in other contexts.¹⁵ Further, an extra \$240 per year to reduce gun assaults by 30% does not seem unreasonable compared with the \$1,800 that crime-prevention efforts cost the average American household each year,¹⁶ especially since people's fear of crime seems to be motivated largely by the fear of *violent* crime.¹⁷

Moreover, the use of survey data is preferable to the main alternative, which is to extrapolate the value of what people would pay to reduce gun violence from the implied value of improved safety as revealed in workplace and other settings. On the one hand, a large percentage of gunshot victims are engaged in highly risky activity and appear to place relatively little value on their own lives. On the other hand, the payment that people will require to accept riskier jobs only captures the value of improvements in personal safety and excludes some of the most important benefits from reducing gun violence, such as a diminished risk of injury to loved ones and reduced need for caution in everyday life.

However, our survey data cover only assault and homicide. To place a value on unintentional shootings or gun suicides, we do, with some trepidation, borrow numbers from other arenas. After adjusting for differences in age and risk between those at high risk of gunshot injury and the population as a whole, our calculations suggest that the elimination of unintentional gunshot injuries and gun suicides is probably worth as much as

\$20 billion per year. Adding these estimates to those obtained from our survey data for gun assaults suggests that the annual costs of gun violence are on the order of \$100 billion.

These results serve to highlight the importance of using the right accounting framework. Traditionally, policymakers have focused on a framework known as the “cost of illness” method, which in practice is the sum of victims’ medical expenses (and other “direct costs” of injuries) and the value of their lost earnings. In spirit, this method borrows from national-product accounting and ignores most of what is captured in the willingness-to-pay approach: the subjective value of safety, concern about others’ welfare, and the costs of prevention and avoidance. The bottom line is that medical expenses and lost productivity make up very little of the societal burden of gun violence.

Policy Evaluation

With more than 200 million guns in private hands,¹⁸ many people are understandably skeptical about the ability of public policy to reduce the burden of gun violence. Yet there are interventions that hold promise in reducing the volume of gun-shot injuries in America and may have benefits that exceed the costs.

Efforts to keep guns away from those deemed at high risk for misusing them has been an important goal of gun policy, though these policies have been criticized for their potentially negative effects on the ability of citizens to defend themselves. For example, James Q. Wilson has argued that “Guns are almost certainly contributors to the lethality of American violence, but there is no politically or legally feasible way to reduce the stock of guns now in private possession to the point that their availability to criminals would be much affected. . . . And even if there were, law-abiding people would lose a means of protecting themselves long before criminals lost a means of attacking them.”¹⁹ Yet we believe that Wilson exaggerates the difficulty of discriminating between law-abiding adults, on the one hand,