Research shows gun owners support gun-violence prevention

With federal funding of firearm injury prevention stalled, a top scientist says policies to reduce gun violence not as polarizing as politicians may think

By Kathleen O'Neil

Efforts to reduce gun violence are often viewed as coming at the expense of gun owners’ rights. As a result, congressional lawmakers have avoided the contentious issue for years, and have severely restricted government funding for firearm violence prevention research. That’s unnecessary, a leading researcher said, since many policies that are effective at reducing gun violence also have the support of the majority of gun owners.

“Often there’s no statistical difference between gun owners and non-gun owners,” in support for policies designed to keep guns out of the hands of people who are more likely to commit crimes, said Daniel Webster, director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research.

One example of an effective policy that gun owners support, at least in surveys, is universal background checks, Webster said.

“For policies like background checks, as an example, we found anywhere from 75% to 82% of gun owners supported those regulations,” Webster said, also explaining that support is “very high” for handgun-purchaser licensing among gun owners who live in states with such laws.

Webster, who presented his research at the 14 to 15 April AAAS Forum on Science & Technology Policy, said that ignoring “this enormous agreement” between gun owners and others wanting to reduce gun-related deaths could prove politically disadvantageous to lawmakers seen as blocking those efforts.

There is one important difference between gun owners and others: Gun owners often don’t trust that the government will carry out firearm policies fairly. “We have to find ways to do this that people trust,” Webster said.

It was that lack of trust that led Jay Dickey, a former Congressman from Arkansas, to urge Congress to take away funding for research on firearm injury prevention at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 1996. Congress also passed the “Dickey Amendment,” adding language prohibiting CDC—and in later years, other federal agencies—from using federal funds for activities that could be characterized as advocating or promoting gun control.

“At one time, I thought research was tantamount to gun control,” Dickey said at the forum. Now, years after he became friends with the CDC researcher he once opposed, he has reversed his position.

Mark Rosenberg was director of the CDC’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, which funded the controversial research. After a congressional hearing where Dickey grilled Rosenberg, the two met in Dickey’s office, and they found common ground talking about their children. Over time, they came to understand each other’s positions on this contentious issue, they said.

“[H]aving a friendship with Mark, I have now come back around to where I’m seeing that research is important and that we can do the research without endangering the Second Amendment or having gun control,” Dickey said.

Rosenberg, addressing scientists and science policy-makers at the forum, suggested that gun-violence prevention policies be assessed, not only for how effective they are in reducing gun violence, but also with regard to their effect on responsible gun owners. “We can measure a reduction in gun deaths and gun injuries, but we need help in developing a scale to quantify the impact of a policy on the rights of law-abiding gun owners.”

Rosenberg and Dickey said they now agree that there should be a dramatic increase in funding for gun-violence prevention research, and that federal agencies should still abide by the Dickey clause. Including that provision “will help reassure supporters of the Second Amendment that the CDC will use the money for important research and not for gun-control advocacy,” Rosenberg said.

After the Dickey amendment was passed, many federal administrators were unwilling to let researchers test the parameters of the law and stopped almost all research involving guns. While some research continued, it had a chilling effect on the field. President Obama called for an end to the CDC freeze in 2013 following the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, but Congress has not yet restored the funding. Science organizations, including AAAS, have also urged Congress to restore funding for gun-violence prevention research.

FORUM’S BROADER MESSAGE. In the forum’s keynote address, John Holdren, director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, said that researchers need to be more transparent and increase efforts to tell policy-makers and the public about their work and its value while they develop innovations to confront such global issues as climate change.

“There is simply an inadequate understanding of how important science, technology, and innovation are to our economy, to our quality of life, to our national security,” said Holdren. “Until we lift up that level of public understanding, we won’t have public support for the kinds of increases in investment by the federal government that will be warranted.”

Kathryn D. Sullivan, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), told attendees of the forum’s William D. Carey lecture that the public expects science to make important contributions to health, safety, and prosperity while justifying research funding. Scientists are facing increased demand for transparency in the scientific process and in science-based decisions from interest groups, the media, citizens, and Congress, she said.

NOAA researchers have been the target of a recent congressional inquiry after they published findings in Science that a 15-year slowing in the rate of global warming early in the 21st century was likely due to incorrect temperature estimates, and that warming had continued at the same rate during that period.

The “apparent decline in society’s confidence in science as an enterprise of special value to society and of scientists as respected and trustworthy people,” is very concerning, Sullivan said.

Steve Case, founder of AOL, gave the Gilbert S. Omenn Grand Challenges Address. Case said that the next wave of innovators and entrepreneurs need to productively coordinate with policy-makers to further integrate the Internet throughout such important arenas as health, education, transportation, and energy.

The 2016 forum, which drew hundreds of participants, was the Association’s 41st.
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