

# Safe Society, Safe Guns

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*A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico*

*By Christine Robinson*

*April 3, 2016*

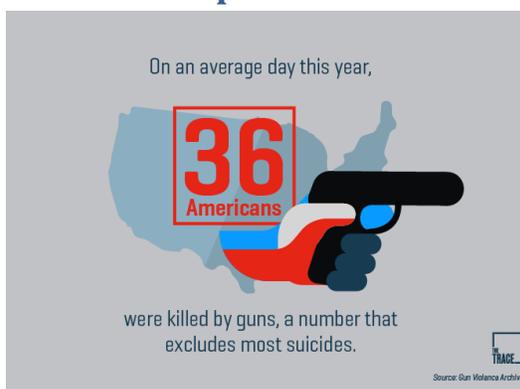
## Reading:

The writing of this sermon required me to prune away pages and pages of notes I'd collected over the last few months. I decided to post them over the next week to the church's Facebook page, so you can watch and comment there if you want to. But one tidbit...it was just too poignant and important. So consider this a sidebar to the sermon...then we'll get to gun safety in a moment.

Just a few short decades ago, almost everybody, liberal or conservative, thought that the Second Amendment addressed the issue of a state's right to organize a militia, not an individual's right to own a gun...and that is the historically correct interpretation.

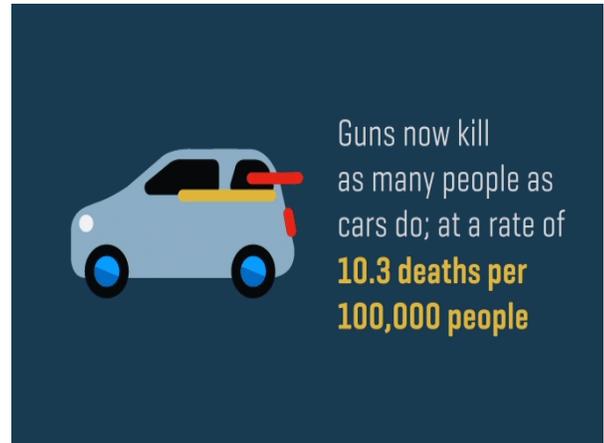
The Second Amendment was added to the Bill of Rights at the insistence of Southern states who had and enforced participation in white citizen militias to keep the slave population under control. If when you hear "militia," you think of the farmers who fired the shot heard round the world, think instead of groups of white men hunting down escaped slaves. That's the militia required for the well-ordered, southern state in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and that had to be accommodated. It's another one of those terrible compromises that seemed necessary to create a nation, the consequences of which we have been dealing ever since.

## Slide Show Script



- 1.
2. and 50 Americans killed themselves with guns.

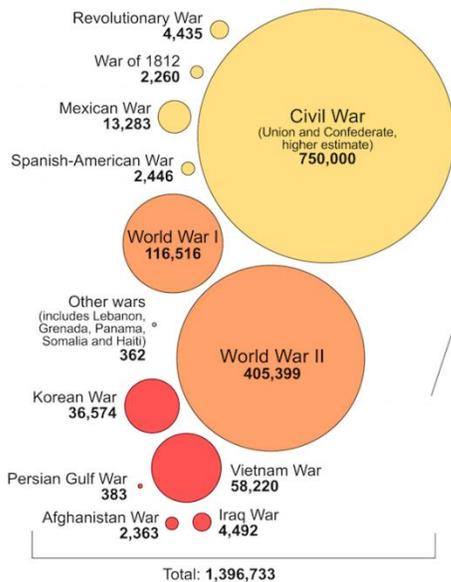
- That's a total of 33,000 Americans who died by gun last year. About 11,000 or one third were murdered, about 20,000, nearly 2/3, killed themselves. Another sliver of folks were killed accidentally, (that's the green) or by police for a variety of good and bad reasons, (that's the purple), and a few more who died by gun, but we're not sure why. (light blue) 33 THOUSAND people.
- There is another way to look at these numbers. 2.6 million people died in the USA last year, of which 11,000 were murders by gun. That's actually four tenths of one percent, the thinnest of green lines on the graphic. Of those murders, two tenths of one percent were "mass murders", that is, with more than four murders occurring in one incident. The majority of those murders are domestic or gang related.
- In contrast, between 2005 and 2015, an average of 7 Americans each year were killed by terrorists.



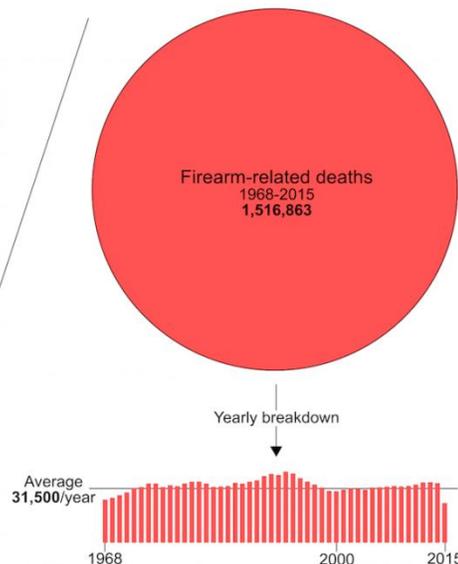
**"More Americans have died from guns in the United States since 1968 than on battlefields of all the wars in American history."**

Nicholas Kristof, *The New York Times*, Aug. 26, 2015

**DEATHS FROM WARFARE**  
1775-2015



**FIREARM-RELATED DEATHS**  
1968-2015



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- In addition to all this death, about 76 thousand people each year survive gun injuries, which range from superficial to catastrophic.
- In 2015, 756 children and teens were killed by guns.

9. In 2015, 52 American children under the age of three got a hold of a gun and shot someone. 19 killed themselves with that gun. 25 more hurt themselves, 13 hurt other people and 2 killed other people.
10. Domestic Violence, almost always perpetrated on women by men, are more likely to happen in households where there is a gun, and when they do, they are more than 12 times as likely to prove fatal.
11. Want to know more? Want to Do Something?

More Information:  
[The Trace.org](http://TheTrace.org)

Ready to be active?  
[New Mexicans to Prevent Gun Violence](#)

## Sermon

Now, what?

It's hard to figure out where to start. It's a massive subject and most treatments of it on both sides are so polarized that you have to check every statistic you are going to rely on for accuracy and proper interpretation. And you all know how little I like polarized conversations. I try very hard to see both sides of a controversy and assume that most people are doing what they can with the situation. That's a part of honoring their worth and dignity...which, I would remind you, is one of the basics of our UU faith. Anyway, when you want to negotiate common ground and you are on the losing side, that's the best way to proceed.

Liberalism, with its strategy of "gun control", limiting gun availability by law, is on the losing side. This strategy, begun in righteous indignation and legitimate fear for our political system, after the rash of political assassinations in the 1960's, was ill thought out, one sided, and provoked a backlash. Even the name.... gun control, could have been more politic. Nobody likes to be controlled.

In addition, gun control measures were often promulgated by people who didn't know much about guns, using outdated language, and focused on weapons that are not the real problem.

The backlash was extreme. The National Rifle Association and its members pumped millions of dollars over 40 years into political races and education campaigns. State by state, laws were passed affirming the right to bear arms and promulgating a novel interpretation of the second amendment; that the right to bear arms was so absolute and sacrosanct that no regulation of guns would be permitted. The Republican party utterly caved to this pressure, and no small number of democratic legislators did, too. All this activity in the end, has changed the way the Second Amendment is understood in this nation and that's now been backed up by a Supreme Court Case. But before you start calling the NRA a terrorist organization, let me point out that

this was exactly the same strategy used by Equal Marriage advocates, even more successfully, over about the same period of time.

At the moment, deregulation of guns and increasing gun ownership is continuing apace, although I would mention that the increase in guns in our society is almost all a matter of many gun owners owning many more guns, rather than an increase in the number of people who own guns. There's actually been a decrease in the number of households where guns are present in the past 40 years, largely due to a decrease in the popularity of hunting. Still, there are some alarming trends and a staggering number of preventable deaths each year.

I have been thinking about this topic for about 6 months now, and hardly a day has gone by that some state legislature has not passed a new law favorable to gun owners and gun carriers, and hardly a week has gone by without some horrific story of carnage like last Friday's shooting at a restaurant here in town. New Mexico, as you probably know, has both a higher rate of gun ownership and a higher rate of gun fatalities than most of the rest of the nation. It joins most of the rural west in this grim statistic.

The deeper I got into this morass about guns in our society, the more I wanted to have a better understanding of gun owners, of what they were getting out of their gun ownership, and where there might be places to make common cause to make our society, which is a society with guns, safer for everybody. So, I asked my Kung Fu teacher, a retired cop who also teaches concealed carry classes, to talk with me about my questions. Our conversation was very enlightening. In the end he invited me to attend a concealed carry permit class, and urged me to come at least to the classroom half. I went out of duty, interested more in the people I would encounter there than the actual subject...but after that day, which involved handling unloaded guns, and a beginning sense of how seriously gun safety is taken and just how much it takes to ensure safety around guns, I went more eagerly to a stimulating day at the gun range where...you will be horrified to know, I qualified for a concealed carry license with a gun borrowed from the instructor and first 25 bullets I had ever shot in my life. I was very surprised. I'm a terrible shot in computer games and frankly had expected real shooting to be harder.

Though I admit to a little stab of pride, I was not actually pleased. Much as I enjoyed and learned in my class, the most important thing I learned is that I had not learned, or practiced, nearly enough to be a safe or effective gun user, which is actually both physically and mentally demanding. The only reason I still have undamaged feet, for instance, is due to admonishment

after admonishment by my alert instructor not to point the gun at my own toes and to keep my finger off the trigger, and I am under no illusion that I have those crucial habits fixed in my brain after only a few hours of training.

Turns out that the most critical and difficult skill of hand gun use is not how to shoot, it's how not to shoot. How to not shoot your foot or your buddy, how to not shoot by accident, how to not shoot in anger, how to not shoot your teenager creeping in after hours, and so on. The week's news gave us the best lesson of all in that truth, as we read about the tragic, accidental shooting of a police officer by his highly trained, highly practiced supervisor.

Here is something else I learned in talking to people who used guns. They believe that their guns keep them safe....and the people I spoke to had reasons I don't have to feel threatened. People who work in criminal justice have to worry about the criminals they have offended in their careers. One fellow in my class was about to hike the Pacific Crest trail, where isolation, wildlife, and wild people are a danger.

It became clear to me that the people who carry guns around in their daily life would no more go about their business without a gun at hand than you or I would sleep easily knowing our front door was unlocked. How many of you lock your doors at night? Everybody. Imagine how you would feel if some do-gooder social movement suggested to you that it was just uncivil to lock your doors and seemed to be trying to make laws to keep you from doing it.

Now, as a matter of fact, it's not particularly likely that your home will be invaded when you are in it, an overall nationwide probability of about 1/one hundredth of one percent each year, so you don't really need to lock your doors. But I can promise you you'd feel angry and unsafe if you were prohibited from doing it. It is really important for human beings to feel safe, and we are not altogether rational about how we do it.

There is a lot of fear in our changing world today. It hangs like a fog around us and effects many aspects of our lives. We are all worried about the future, and people who worry often latch on to the pieces of their worry that they can control. You lock your doors. Some people carry guns. And the more tenuous your sense of general security, the harder it is for you to find housing in a safe neighborhood, the more insecure your job is, the less financial cushion you have, the more untreated mentally ill people you see around you, the more fear you are likely to feel.

(Many liberal people who intensely dislike guns have at least some of these same pressures in their lives, but here's an interesting bit of knowledge about the brain. Our brains differ, both by nature and by nurture, in how much fear we feel. Extent of fearfulness is a human difference, like sexual preference is a human difference. It's not a moral failing or a failure of reason. Here's another interesting tidbit for you. Generally speaking, people who are less likely to feel

generally fearful are more likely to be liberals, and people who are more likely to feel generally fearful are also more likely to be politically conservative. It is likely that the most rational amount of fearfulness lies somewhere between the poles; that there is some truth to the conservative view that liberals are blithely oblivious of danger and some truth to the liberal view that conservatives respond way to quickly to fear mongering. If we are going to solve this problem of gun safety together, we have to understand each other.)

Yep, it is statistically true that the gun bought to protect the household against invasion is more likely to be used some other way: by accident, against a household member, or, after being stolen, and guns carried on the street are even more likely to increase violence against the carrier than to prevent it. But actually, statistically, none of these things happen very often, and anyway, nobody thinks that statistics really apply to them

Liberals have believed that the increase in the number of guns and gun carrying in society will vastly increase the murder and assault rate. Conservatives have believed that it will vastly lessen it, that an armed society will be a safer one. So far, the numbers are on the liberal side, but only about assault, and only a little bit. Most guns carried around by the 13 million concealed carry permit owners and carried openly where allowed are never used.

It doesn't feel like that to me. It feels like gun mayhem has increased dramatically, but that is because the media is on to the issue. Or, it may be that we are seeing the beginning of a trend. Either way, though, our society is ripe for change.

So while traditional gun control is dead, the good news is that there IS interest in the gun-owning community and in the gun shy community both about a variety of safety and crime reduction measures. An overwhelming number of gun owners...up to 90% in some polls, want all gun buyers to be subject to background checks, for instance. And although in the past, virtually all Republican and many Democratic legislators have gone with the NRA opposing this, the NRA is increasingly seen by gun owners as radically out of touch with their concerns.

Background checks do keep guns out of the hands of criminals, domestic abusers, and people with the kinds of mental illnesses which cause them to be violent to themselves or others. The tide is quickly changing on this matter, and this is a moment when sensible voices may be able to work together on this piece of the puzzle of gun violence. If you're interested, New Mexicans Against Gun Violence is doing the work. They need your support and your money.

Let's talk for a minute about the Second Amendment . In the Heller case, Justice John Roberts wrote for the majority that the Second Amendment NOW means that citizens must be allowed to own guns and use them in their homes for self-defense.

Now, that is actually a much more limited right than most gun enthusiasts believe they have, and in most states, they are given, by statute, more rights. However the Heller case is quite clear that this is not any kind of an absolute right. In fact, Justice Antonin Scalia specifically stated that there was no doubt about the continued constitutionality of “laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings.”

You can actually make the case that this new interpretation of the second amendment is a good thing for those who seek gun safety laws, because it means there is no slippery slope. There is a wall of protection around the right to own a gun. But there is plenty of room for evidence-based gun safety regulations.

## Suicide

Now, I want to say a bit about suicide. I’m going to do a sermon on suicide sometime this year, because it is a big and complex one and it affects us disproportionately. In my ministry to hundreds of UU’s over almost 40 years, I’ve only known of one UU killed by a gun by another person, for any reason. But over those same years, at about a dozen of us have killed ourselves with a gun.

Remember that there are about twice as many suicides with gun as murders with gun. Some people discount gun fatality statistics when they include suicides, but I don’t. First of all I regard most suicides as a preventable but fatal outcome of an illness, depression, which is sort of like the flu; so common that it is sort of a shock to learn that it sometimes causes death. But...it does. So does depression.

A person who becomes suicidal often begins to believe that the world would be better off without him, and is in so much pain that it seems that he’d be better off dead, too. This is almost always not true...people do care and things will likely get better. The majority of people who survive an attempted suicide get some help and don’t try again.

When the person contemplating suicide has access to a gun, they are 12 times more likely to succeed in their attempt than when using other common methods. That means they are 12 times less likely to get the help they need that would lead them back to health. And 12 times more likely to leave family and friends with the extra painful and complicated grief that comes from suicide.

When we talk about gun safety, it is important to talk about suicide by gun. It is especially important for US to talk about suicide by gun. There are a lot of preventable deaths and a lot of misinformation that would respond to a public education campaign.

I do think it is important to talk about and work for gun safety. Guns are here to stay. And while it is almost certainly true that the most committed terrorists and criminals will continue to have access to them, only about 1/6<sup>th</sup> of gun deaths are cause by those two groups. Almost all the rest of gun deaths are self-inflicted, homicide by someone the victim knows, and accidents. That's a lot of preventable death.

### **What World Work**

First on my list is to repeal the law which prohibits the CDC from studying the public health effect of guns. It's called the Dickey amendment, and even Mr. Dickey, a republican legislator, now retired, thinks that it was a bad idea. In hindsight, he thinks a little knowledge would be helpful. *Lately, he wrote; "The highway industry, it solved their problem with the use of science and didn't eliminate the car. If someone asked me, "What do you think the solution would be to eliminate head-on collisions?," I never would have thought that a little guardrail would be enough force to stop a car. But science won out. There's no telling what science will do. If a consistent, continual effort is made, we'll find a solution."*

That's the spirit!

Second on my list: Work towards a universal background check system and beef up the background check mechanism to match the need...which is likely to about double. That's how many guns are now sold by individuals not subject to the background check rule.

Third on my personal list: treat gun education and licensing, at least to carry in public, on par with driver education and licensing. A written test, enough supervised practice that safety measures come automatically, and a practical test that allows the gun user to show that they are actually likely to do more good than harm in the kind of stressful situation they are carrying a gun to prevail in.

There are more, but those three measures would be a solid beginning of reasonable people on two sides working together for what they want: a safe society. Here is what it will take. Enough people who have been hiding their head in the sand, hoping this issue would go away...I put myself in that category....to join organizations, give money, write letters to the editor and create a movement.

What do you care about more? Racial Justice and Black Lives Matter? Black Lives Matter is not just an issue of police killings. It is also a matter of the fact that Blacks are murdered with guns way out of proportion to their numbers. The situation in New Mexico with Hispanic lives and Native lives is not so different. If white society had endured the level of gun violence black society has endured, we'd be long past where we are by now. It has been too easy to ignore gun violence when it was somewhere else. Let's take it seriously and get together to make a change.

What do you care about more? Violence against women? There is not time in this sermon to demonstrate to you that the prevalence of guns in society means that women are being more abused, more seriously abused, and more often fatally abused.

Is it child welfare you care about? Mental health? Safety on the street? Guns have a negative effect on all of these matters. This is not rocket science but it's also not as simple as non-gun owners seem to imagine it is. It's time to learn, to converse, and to work together.

When President Obama commented on the Supreme Court case that legalized same sex marriage, he praised a generation of activists who had worked slowly and in spite of many setbacks to bring that day. "What an extraordinary achievement," he said. "What a vindication of the belief that ordinary people can do extraordinary things. What a reminder of what Bobby Kennedy once said about how small actions can be like pebbles being thrown into a still lake, and ripples of hope cascade outwards and change the world."

Are you in?