

Gun Laws and Gun Deaths: An Empirical Analysis and Theological Assessment

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IN THE UNITED STATES, THE QUESTION OF HOW (AND WHETHER) to regulate firearms is a perennial debate that circles around the same issues without resolution or progress. Much of this is the result of increased partisan polarization around gun control.¹ With partisan positions more ossified, people are quick to make reflexive judgments about gun policy based on their political allegiances without thinking about other values. While this short-circuited analysis helps prevent decision fatigue, an assessment based entirely on default assumptions and political tribalism is more in line with the “remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 64) that Pope Francis lamented than with the “serious attempts to make sound moral judgments based on the truths of our faith” that the United States Catholic Bishops insist are the responsibility of the faithful as they engage in political life.² A better response from Catholics requires more sustained engagement of various gun control policies in light of the theological convictions that are supposed to inform a Catholic way of life. This article provides the foundation for such an analysis, drawing on empirical data about the role of firearms in lethal violence to assert that Catholics have good reasons to advocate for tighter restrictions on access to guns as a result of their faith commitments.

The article proceeds in three parts. The first discusses the nature of gun violence in the United States today and explains why the current situation is untenable for those who profess the Catholic faith. The

¹ “Amid a Series of Mass Shootings in the US, Gun Policy Remains Deeply Divisive,” *Pew Research Center*, April 20, 2021, www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/04/20/amid-a-series-of-mass-shootings-in-the-u-s-gun-policy-remains-deeply-divisive/. For further analysis of the development of this trend and its impact, see Harry Enten, “The US Has Never Been So Polarized on Guns,” *FiveThirtyEight*, October 4, 2017, fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-u-s-has-never-been-so-polarized-on-guns/.

² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019), no. 17.

second examines the ways gun policies affect gun deaths, evaluating existing research on the connections between firearm availability and gun deaths to describe how less access to guns can yield the kind of reductions in lethal violence Catholics should hope to see as a result of their concerns for the common good. Finally, the third part identifies concrete gun policies most likely to achieve the positive ends at which a Catholic approach to gun violence should aim. The result is a clearer account of how Catholic theological convictions can yield a more critical reflection on gun control debates, opening avenues for a more faithful form of citizenship for Catholics navigating a heavily contested but extremely consequential feature of contemporary political life.

GUN VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES: AN UNACCEPTABLE STATUS QUO

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the United States had 39,707 gun-related deaths in 2019, the most recent year to have been thoroughly evaluated by scholars. On a population basis, this translates to 12.09 gun deaths per 100,000 people in the United States.³ While these numbers might seem small—particularly in comparison to the more than 1 million deaths attributed to the COVID pandemic—the totals for gun deaths are hardly inconsequential.⁴ First, the 2019 numbers are consistent with an alarming rise in firearm-related deaths (the nearly identical 2017 numbers represented the highest total in nearly four decades), which has now made firearm-related deaths more common than motor vehicle fatalities.⁵ Meanwhile, both the absolute numbers and the per capita death rate place the United States among the nations with the most firearms deaths globally, significantly outside the ranges typical

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Web-Based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS): Injury Counts and Rates; All Intents Firearm Deaths and Rates per 100,000,” accessed May 24, 2023, www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal/index.html. Data from subsequent years show even more troubling trends (45,222 deaths or 13.64 per 100,000 in 2020 and 48,830 or 14.71 per 100,000 in 2021), but these data are too recent to have been subjected to the scholarly analysis the 2019 data has received. I therefore focus on the 2019 statistics to keep the comparative analyses as consistent as possible.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Trends in United States COVID-19 Hospitalizations, Deaths, and Emergency Visits by Geographic Area,” *COVID Data Tracker*, May 18, 2023, covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#trends_totaldeaths_select_00.

⁵ Jiaquan Xu, Sherry L. Murphy, Kenneth D. Kochanek, and Elizabeth Arias, “Deaths: Final Data for 2019,” *National Vital Statistics Reports* 70, no. 8 (July 26, 2021): 14. To understand the trend by way of comparison, see Kenneth D. Kochanek, Sherry L. Murphy, Jiaquan Xu, and Elizabeth Arias, “Deaths: Final Data for 2017,” *National Vital Statistics Reports* 68, no. 9 (June 24, 2019): 13.

of its high-income peer countries in the Global North.⁶ In international terms, the impact of gun violence in the United States is a disheartening manifestation of American exceptionalism, exemplified by the fact that in 2019 the United States, which had approximately four percent of the world's population, was home to forty-four percent of the planet's firearm suicides.⁷ This comparison with other countries therefore not only reveals a damning portrait of gun violence in the United States but also indicates that a less tragic outcome is indeed possible.

When considering this data in light of Catholic theological commitments, this final point is crucial, for the fact that the current level of gun deaths in the United States is not foreordained underscores the violence these statistics represent. Firearms are not merely another cause of death like heart disease or cancer, which reflect the finite nature of the human condition—what Brian Davies (following Thomas Aquinas) would call an unfortunate but unavoidable form of “evil suffered.” On the contrary, firearms cause unnecessary deaths, representing a much less inevitable manifestation of “evil done,” which can only occur as a result of a misuse of human freedom.⁸ The misuse is amplified by the fact that the Catholic Church emphasizes “the incomparable value of every human person” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 2) and has insisted that “whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or wilful self-destruction ... [is a] supreme dishonor to the Creator” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 27). From this vantage point, each gun death is a personal tragedy that represents a sinful usurpation of God's authority over life and death, cutting somebody's life short through a direct violation of what the Catholic Church considers to be the human person's most fundamental right—the right to life (see *Compendium*,

⁶ The Global Burden of Disease 2016 Injury Collaborators, “Global Mortality from Firearms, 1990–2016,” *JAMA* 320, no. 8 (August 28, 2018): 792–814. This study determined that firearm deaths generally had an inverse relationship with a country's income profile (809), and an earlier study comparing firearm mortality rates in 23 “populous, high-income countries” found that the United States had a total death rate 10 times higher than its comparable peers. Erin Grinshteyn and David Hemenway, “Violent Death Rates: The US Compared with Other High-income OECD Countries, 2010,” *American Journal of Medicine* 129, no. 3 (March 1, 2016): 269. For more recent data comparing “high-income countries and territories” beyond just the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, see Katherine Leach-Kemon and Rebecca Sirull, “On Gun Violence, the United States is an Outlier,” *Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation*, May 31, 2022, www.healthdata.org/acting-data/gun-violence-united-states-outlier.

⁷ Kara Fox, Krystina Shveda, Natalie Croker, and Marco Chacon, “How US Gun Culture Stacks Up with the World,” *CNN*, April 10, 2023, www.cnn.com/2021/11/26/world/us-gun-culture-world-comparison-intl-cmd/index.html.

⁸ Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 92–97.

no. 157). Given that the Catholic community avers that all human rights, including this most fundamental one, are “*inalienable* insofar as ‘no one can legitimately deprive another person, whoever they may be, of these rights, since this would do violence to their nature’” (*Compendium*, no. 153), gun deaths of any number must remain a significant issue for all Catholics looking to assess the state of social life according to their faith commitments. Indeed, given the Catholic Church’s expectation that Catholics have “an absolute imperative to respect, love, and promote the life of every brother and sister” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 77), the dramatic numbers of gun deaths in the United States are not merely a matter of which Catholics should take note; it is also a serious concern that demands a proactive response in order to fulfill the Christian disciple’s responsibility to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

In addition to concerns about the right to life, there is also another reason for which Catholics in particular should not dismiss the problem of gun violence out of hand in the way that a comparison to other leading causes of death or reliance on political alignments might prompt them to. Specifically, the Catholic commitment to the common good and the church’s emphasis on the preferential option for the poor help highlight the fact that the damage gun violence does to the inviolable dignity of the human person in the United States is even more dramatic than an initial glance at the data might suggest. After all, the national statistics are generic averages, and so can only provide a comprehensive picture if all gun deaths are distributed more or less evenly which, of course, is not the case. Instead, gun deaths tend to concentrate in certain areas and among certain populations, creating a maldistribution of lethal violence in the United States that leaves some communities disproportionately affected by the heartbreaking reality of gun violence while giving others the luxury of imagining that firearm deaths are not a social problem. Some of these differences may seem benign. For instance, the fact that New York had 3.9 gun deaths per 100,000 residents in 2019 while Massachusetts had 3.4, does not by itself indicate that some gross injustice has been committed against all New Yorkers.⁹ When the variations become dramatic, however, they begin to have moral significance because no one should have to live with the near constant risk of firearm death in their daily life that the high concentration of lethal violence in certain communities entails. These circumstances deprive people of the “sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own

⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Firearm Mortality by State: 2019,” *National Center for Health Statistics*, last modified March 1, 2022, www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/firearm_mortality/firearm.htm.

fulfillment” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26), thereby violating the common good the Catholic Church insists belongs to “all and [to] each individual” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38). Unfortunately, a closer analysis of the data on gun deaths reveals that these sorts of deprivations are indeed occurring for many people and in many places.

To begin with geography, the uneven distribution of gun deaths across states results in some stark numbers across the spectrum, as thirty states had firearm-related death rates higher than the national average in 2019, and Alaska, the state with the highest firearm mortality rate, had more than double that average with 24.4 deaths per 100,000 people.¹⁰ While no single explanation accounts for every state’s experience, at the highest end, state-level numbers typically reflect the outsized role firearms play in suicide. For example, Alaska had the second highest rate of suicides per capita in 2019, and the states with the four highest rates of suicide that year were all in the top ten when sorted by firearm-related deaths per capita.¹¹ The concentration of gun deaths in certain states therefore raises important questions about society’s ability to aid the vulnerable individuals who are most at risk for suicide, revealing that the dramatic variation between states raises morally salient issues insofar as these “deaths of despair” often have complex structural roots.¹²

When one considers homicides separately, another geographic variation in the distribution of gun violence emerges, the rural-urban divide. Thus, one comprehensive analysis of gun homicides, which used 2015 data, found that a handful of cities containing less than a quarter of the US population accounted for half of all gun homicides.¹³ Much like the suicide rate, these numbers point to larger structural problems. In urban contexts, the highest rates of gun homicides are further “clustered” in a small number of neighborhoods “marked by intense poverty, low levels of education, and racial segregation.”¹⁴ These areas, which have gun homicide rates nearly sixteen times higher than the national averages and roughly 400 times higher than

¹⁰ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Firearm Mortality by State: 2019.”

¹¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Suicide Mortality by State: 2019,” *National Center for Health Statistics*, last modified February 15, 2023, www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/suicide-mortality/suicide.htm, see also Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Firearm Mortality by State: 2019.”

¹² Although their evaluation involves more than just suicide, Anne Case and Agnus Deaton’s recent research has made much of the complex structural forces influencing what they have identified as “deaths of despair.” See Anne Case and Agnus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

¹³ Aliza Aufrichtig, Lois Beckett, Jan Diehm, and Jamiles Lartey, “Want to Fix Gun Violence in America? Go Local,” *The Guardian*, January 9, 2017, www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2017/jan/09/special-report-fixing-gun-violence-in-america.

¹⁴ Aufrichtig, Beckett, Diehm, and Lartey, “Want to Fix Gun Violence.”

the rates typical of high-income countries across the globe, represent structural manifestations of the “failure to bother to love” that the moral theologian James Keenan has described as the crux of sin.¹⁵ The concentration of gun violence in these areas is therefore not a statistical fluke but a pronounced symptom of collective moral failure that demands a collective moral response.

Meanwhile, the role of racial segregation in urban homicides points to another way in which deadly gun violence disproportionately affects certain communities and not others. “The nation’s number one victims of violence,” the public policy researcher Thomas Abt observes, “are disadvantaged and disenfranchised young African American and Latino men,” with homicide the second most common cause of death among Latino men and the leading cause of death for black men, “account[ing] for more deaths *than the nine other top causes combined*.”¹⁶ Research from the Giffords Law Center determined that Black men, who constitute less than 6 percent of the US population, account for 52 percent of all gun homicide victims, with the result that Black Americans are more than 10 times more likely than their White compatriots to die as a result of firearm homicides (20.3 deaths v. 1.8 deaths per 100,000).¹⁷ Women of color similarly bear a higher burden of gun violence than their white peers in domestic violence contexts.¹⁸ These statistics underscore the United States Catholic Bishops’ insistence “that racism is a life issue” and point to the profound importance of tackling the segregation and inequality that persist in the United States today with “a genuine conversion of heart, a conversion that will compel change, and the reform of our institutions and society.”¹⁹ With respect to gun violence, this conversion must start with a recognition of the outsized effects of gun violence on communities of color, a reality that should then stimulate a vigorous response from Catholics, called to recognize that “‘the love of Christ impels us’ to see others as our brothers and sisters (2 Cor 5:14). For, ‘if [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it...’

¹⁵ Aufrechtig, Beckett, Diehm, and Lartey, “Want to Fix Gun Violence”; James F. Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 55–58.

¹⁶ Thomas Abt, *Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence—And a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 2 (emphasis in original).

¹⁷ “Gun Violence Statistics,” *Giffords Law Center*, accessed May 24, 2023, giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-violence-statistics/.

¹⁸ “Domestic Violence,” *Giffords Law Center*, accessed May 24, 2023, giffords.org/issues/domestic-violence/.

¹⁹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love; A Pastoral Letter against Racism* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018), 30, 7.

(1 Cor 12:26).”²⁰ There can be no dismissiveness of the depth and breadth of suffering the current state of affairs inflicts on men, women, and children of color. On the contrary, Catholics must confront the status quo on gun violence in the United States.

Beyond place and race, there are further demographic characteristics that affect the distribution of gun deaths in specific circumstances. For instance, although men are more likely than women to be victims of homicide overall, “more than two-thirds of intimate partner homicides involve a male perpetrator and a female victim.”²¹ Unfortunately, these statistics speak directly to the uneven distribution of gun violence because research indicates that guns increase the lethality of family violence by a factor of 12.²² The numbers also highlight a broader social injustice, as scholars note that feminicide emerges from patterns of cultural oppression and social exclusion that get reified in institutional forms.²³ Meanwhile, children face more acute risks of gun violence than other demographic groups. According to the Giffords Law Center, firearm injuries were the leading cause of death for all children in the United States in 2020.²⁴ Boys have historically had the highest risk, accounting for more than four-fifths of all children’s gun deaths between 2002–2014.²⁵ Some of these deaths were related to homicides, resulting in a significant discrepancy between races, but many of the children’s gun deaths resulted from accidental injuries and suicides.²⁶ Much like the issues of race and place, these disparities demand a Catholic response as a result of the Catholic Church’s affirmation of the equal dignity of all who have been made in the image and likeness of God (*Compendium*, no. 144).

While each of these disparities poses a problem for Catholics because of the ways the concentration of lethal firearm violence puts a greater number of lives at risk in certain circumstances, they also

²⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, 18.

²¹ Emma E. Fridel and James Alan Fox, “Gender Differences in Patterns and Trends in US Homicide, 1967–2017,” *Violence and Gender* 6, no. 1 (2019): 32.

²² Linda E. Saltzman, James A. Mercy, Patrick W. O’Carroll, Mark L. Rosenberg, and Philip H. Rhodes, “Weapon Involvement and Injury Outcomes in Family and Intimate Assaults,” *JAMA* 267, no. 22 (June 10, 1992): 3043–3047.

²³ Marianne Tierney Fitzgerald, “Vulnerability and Development: Reading *Populorum Progressio* in Light of Feminicide,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, no. 1 (2017): 83–84, 89.

²⁴ “Kids and Guns,” *Giffords Law Center*, accessed May 24, 2023, giffords.org/issues/kids-and-guns/.

²⁵ Katherine A. Fowler, Linda L. Dahlberg, Tadesse Haileyesus, Carmen Gutierrez, and Sarah Bacon, “Childhood Firearm Injuries in the United States,” *Pediatrics* 140, no. 1 (July 2017): e20163486, 4.

²⁶ Fowler, Dahlberg, Haileyesus, Gutierrez, and Bacon, “Childhood Firearm Injuries,” 4.

reveal the problematic power of the “structures of sin” the Catholic Church emphatically condemns (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 36). These structures, which “always” involve the “falsification or the oppression of some human beings by others,” capture the influence of collective forces, like systemic forms of racism, that manage to shape the decisions of individual moral agents and then inform the experience of all in the world around them.²⁷ As a form of social sin, these structures of sin represent “sin committed against the justice due in relations between individuals, between the individual and the community, and also between the community and the individual,” functioning as a “sin against the common good and its demands” (*Compendium*, no. 118). Given that the uneven distribution of gun deaths tracks so neatly with the communities and demographic groups routinely excluded from the greatest benefits of social life in the United States—for instance, the mentally ill, the economically disenfranchised, the racially minoritized, and those denigrated by gender or age—there is a significant dimension of injustice to the unequal burden of gun violence in this country. Indeed, considering the biblical notion of justice as “right relationship” with God and neighbor, there is an immediate violation of justice not only in the disparities themselves but also in the tendency to dismiss these disparities and their impact.²⁸ Right relationship with one’s neighbor requires recognizing her or his hardships, particularly when those hardships reflect broader social problems and are not equally shared.

Finally, Catholics have been called to counteract the pernicious effects of structural sin by embracing a radical solidarity shaped by the preferential option for the poor (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38; *Compendium*, no. 193).²⁹ To ignore the tremendous impact that the current approach to guns has on certain communities is to deny the very “mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 188), at the heart of this solidarity. Catholics must therefore reject the status quo, even when the effects of gun violence seem minimal in their own immediate contexts, because for many of

²⁷ José Ignacio González Faus, “Sin,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 538. For more on the causal influence of structures of sin, see Daniel K. Finn, “What Is a Sinful Social Structure?,” *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (March 2016): 136–164.

²⁸ John R. Donahue, “Biblical Perspectives on Justice,” in *The Faith that Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, ed. John C. Haughey (New York: Paulist, 1977), 69–70.

²⁹ For more on the importance of solidarity as the basis of the Catholic response to structural sin, see Daniel J. Daly, “Structures of Virtue and Vice,” *New Blackfriars* 92, no. 1039 (May 2011): 348.

their brothers and sisters this is quite literally the difference between life and death. Significantly, this conviction must translate into action if it is to have any real impact, for “one of the key distinguishing factors of solidarity is that it is a state of being that demands that people who are in a relationship of solidarity be willing to act on behalf of one another as a result of the bond that they share.”³⁰ One of the most important ways to accomplish this goal is to consider how political policies could help reshape the distribution of lethal violence, something empirical research has recently illuminated by evaluating the relationship between firearm availability and firearm deaths. By examining this empirical data and considering its implications, Catholics can take active steps to combat the violations of the common good evident in the unjust distribution of firearm lethal violence in the United States, demonstrating their commitment to solidarity and their pursuit of justice as right relationship.

GUN POLICIES AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF LETHAL VIOLENCE: EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS

Although there might be a degree of skepticism regarding how much can be done to change the status quo on gun violence, there is good reason to believe that an intentional reevaluation of gun policies could in fact lead to a positive transformation of the dismal state of affairs. The basis for this hope lies in the fact that a significant factor in the current variation of firearm mortality are differences in the legal regulation of gun ownership. The exact relationship between gun policies and gun deaths is a complicated connection to establish precisely, in part because information about this link has important implications for polarized debates about gun control laws. Nevertheless, there is a growing consensus that gun laws can and do affect the distribution of lethal violence in ways that ultimately point toward positive contributions for the common good from tighter legal restrictions on firearm availability. By relying on empirical data rather than anecdotal assumptions, one can arrive at a nuanced understanding of the ways gun policies affect gun deaths. Conscientious Catholics can then use this information to identify concrete opportunities to combat the gun violence epidemic in the United States through the pursuit of the most impactful policy changes.

The simplest way to appreciate how different gun policies could counteract the unjust distribution of lethal firearm violence is to recognize how greater access to firearms translates into more gun deaths. Thanks to studies involving both international comparisons and interstate analyses in the US context, this has become a well-

³⁰ Rebecca Todd Peters, *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014), 65.

documented empirical conclusion, albeit one that deserves nuanced consideration. For instance, an early influential article examined the correlations between firearm access and overall homicide rates among high-income countries after noting that the United States had the highest homicide rate and the highest rates of civilian gun ownership among its peers.³¹ Using a well-established proxy for gun ownership (a necessary concession in all gun studies because few places have comprehensive registries of gun owners or other consistent data on ownership rates), the study's authors found a statistically significant link between firearm availability and overall homicide rates across the sample of economically developed nations.³² A comprehensive review of multiple studies on the links between firearm availability and homicide rates found "a strong association of firearm availability with firearm homicide, but not with nonfirearm homicide."³³ One outlier study suggested that firearm availability in high-income countries did not correlate at a statistically significant level with homicide rates, but by the authors' own admission, this reflected a lack of data rather than evidence disproving the possibility of a connection.³⁴ Significantly, that same study found that gun availability did relate to suicide rates, however, concluding that "the proportion of households owning a firearm was significantly related to the proportion of suicides committed with a gun and the rate of suicides carried out with a gun."³⁵ Since gun suicides are far more lethal than suicide attempts relying on other methods, the increased prevalence of gun suicides in countries with more firearms amounts to another way in which firearm availability affects the distribution of lethal violence, beyond homicide rates in isolation.³⁶

³¹ David Hemenway and Matthew Miller, "Firearm Availability and Homicide Rates across 26 High-Income Countries," *Journal of Trauma: Injury, Infection, and Critical Care* 49, no. 6 (December 2000): 985. International comparative studies on the effects of firearm availability tend to focus on high-income countries because data from lower- and middle-income countries is sparse. Lisa M. Hepburn and David Hemenway, "Firearm Availability and Homicide: A Review of the Literature," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 9, no. 4 (July 2004): 425.

³² Hemenway and Miller, "Firearm Availability and Homicide Rates," 986–987.

³³ Hepburn and Hemenway, "Firearm Availability and Homicide," 429.

³⁴ Tony R. Smith and Bradley R. Stevens, "A Cross-National Investigation of Firearm Availability and Lethal Violence," *European Journal of Psychiatry* 17, no. 1 (January-March 2003): 34–37. This study also had a smaller sample size, which contributed to the authors' judgment that the minimal correlation had only limited significance.

³⁵ Smith and Stevens, "Cross-National Investigation," 34.

³⁶ E. D. Shenassa, S. N. Catlin, and S. L. Buka, "Lethality of Firearms Relative to Other Suicide Methods: A Population Based Study," *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 57, no. 2 (February 2003): 120–124.

These international studies are informative, but they all have their limits, beginning with the “serious problem” of “the quality and comparability of the data.”³⁷ Not only is actual data on firearm ownership hard to come by, but mortality rates are not established uniformly across countries, and nations with fewer resources often have less ability to monitor statistics regularly. Consequently, international studies tend to restrict their samples to countries with readily available firearm death data, meaning that most of these studies are based on samples of convenience rather than completely representative groupings.³⁸ Although this gap might mean that certain broader trends are masked in the existing studies, there is still room to draw meaningful conclusions from the current research. For instance, studies acknowledging the lack of comprehensive international data are able to sort through the convenience samples to arrive at a subset of comparable countries—like the populous high-income countries surveyed in one of the aforementioned articles—that can be used to identify robust correlations. Still, even in these best-case scenarios, the limited sample sizes make it difficult to introduce a wide range of control variables, creating a genuine challenge for international comparisons.³⁹

As a result of these limitations, international studies helpfully point toward a strong correlation between firearm availability and firearm mortality, but they typically fail to offer the kinds of data that would allow researchers to determine the causal direction of this relationship. The one exception to this rule is a single study that used a broad sample of countries at varying stages of economic development and controlled for several variables in order to rule out the prospect of reverse causality (that is, that higher homicide rates prompted an increase in gun ownership). This study found no basis to support the reverse causality hypothesis, leaving the theory that more guns have a causal impact on gun deaths intact. In fairness, however, this study relied on much earlier data, so it is difficult to guarantee that an actual causal trend from increased firearm availability to increased firearm deaths remains persistent.⁴⁰ One team of scholars has used this ambiguity to assert that without a clear causal correlation between increased firearm availability and a country’s homicide and suicide rates, there is no sufficient rationale to promote legal interventions

³⁷ Hepburn and Hemenway, “Firearm Availability and Homicide,” 425.

³⁸ T. S. Richmond, R. Cheney, and C. W. Schwab, “The Global Burden of Non-Conflict Related Firearm Mortality,” *Injury Prevention* 11, no. 6 (December 2005): 351.

³⁹ Hepburn and Hemenway, “Firearm Availability and Homicide,” 429.

⁴⁰ Anthony W. Hoskin, “Armed Americans: The Impact of Firearm Availability on National Homicide Rates,” *Justice Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (September 2001): 569–592, esp. 587–588.

designed to restrict firearm availability.⁴¹ This assertion, however, both overstates the certainty required for empirical data to influence policy judgments and understates the conclusions from existing research.

To begin, those who would challenge the import of international data seem to operate with unrealistic expectations about how to draw conclusions from empirical evidence. By suggesting that policies should not shift until there is complete certainty about a particular connection, advocates of this restrictive approach establish a threshold that empirical data, especially empirical data from social scientific research, will almost never be able to cross. By adopting something analogous to the “precautionary principle,” which says that every new course of action should be rejected until it can be *conclusively* proven that the change will do no harm, these authors create the conditions for an almost absolute maintenance of the status quo because it is much more difficult to rule out every counterfactual than it is to demonstrate the likelihood of some success.⁴² Given the damaging nature of the status quo on gun violence, however, Catholics cannot hew to this set of presuppositions. Rejecting this view is not just a matter of pragmatism, though; there are also theological reasons for a more accepting approach to policy reform because Catholics insist that “decisions about political life are complex and require the exercise of a well-formed conscience aided by prudence.”⁴³ To close off virtually all possibility of change by establishing an unattainable evidentiary threshold does not reflect the kind of “prudential judgment” attuned to “the art of the possible” Catholics are supposed to employ in their evaluation of “specific policy choices.”⁴⁴ Instead, Catholics must use prudence to work through the insights that emerge from the experts, doing their best to draw the most reasonable conclusions from the available data while always being mindful of the fact that they may need to modify their judgments as circumstances change and new evidence appears. When one refuses to overstate the certainty that prudence demands, the current data on the links between firearm availability and gun violence can in fact provide a sufficient basis for reevaluating existing policies and challenging the status quo, an observation that becomes all the more apparent when one considers

⁴¹ Don B. Kates and Gary Mauser, “Would Banning Firearms Reduce Murder and Suicide: A Review of International and Some Domestic Evidence,” *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 30, no. 2 (March 2007): 649–694.

⁴² On the precautionary principle, see Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 246–251.

⁴³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Faithful Citizenship*, no. 31.

⁴⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Faithful Citizenship*, nos. 32–33.

the second problem of understating the conclusions these data currently provide.

With respect to the understatement issue, although there are variations in the size of the correlations between firearm availability and gun deaths in the existing international studies, it does not follow that no such correlation exists. On the contrary, studies have not produced sufficient evidence to reject this connection. Thus, not only have the majority of international comparative studies shown at least some correlation, but the most carefully designed studies have also shown the most significant relationships. The variation, then, stems mostly from differences in the groups of countries sampled, which can have a profound effect on conclusions in this international research, where the inclusion or exclusion of individual countries can shift the data profile dramatically, skewing the sample.⁴⁵ Studies that address these limitations by selecting the most similar countries have established the most statistically significant links between firearm prevalence and firearm homicides, whereas those studies yielding a positive correlation at a statistically nonsignificant level have less comparable samples.⁴⁶ To suggest that there is no empirical evidence for a link between firearm availability and firearm mortality at the international level is therefore inaccurate. At best, there is room for disagreement, but only because of the way some studies were constructed. When considering the big picture by taking stock of the trends that emerge across studies and focusing on the studies using the strongest methods, the actual message from the empirical data is that a correlation between firearm availability and gun deaths is far more likely than not.

Even if one were inclined to question the certainty of the picture arising from these international studies, there is no reason to assume that this needs to be the last word. In an effort to establish the correlation between firearm prevalence and firearm mortality more clearly, researchers have also examined the connections between these two things within the United States, closely studying how state, county, or even city-level variations on one side of the equation impact the other. Because these studies compare different communities within as similar a social context as possible, this “fertile area for research” provides an invaluable complement to the data that emerge from the international comparisons and ultimately further strengthens the conviction that Catholics can do something to interrupt the current distribution of lethal firearm violence through policy reforms.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Hepburn and Hemenway, “Firearm Availability and Homicide,” 427.

⁴⁶ Hepburn and Hemenway, “Firearm Availability and Homicide,” 425–429.

⁴⁷ Mark Gius, “The Effect of Gun Ownership Rates on Homicide Rates: A State-Level Analysis,” *Applied Economics Letters* 16, no. 17 (2009): 1687.

As with the international comparative research, the precise results of the domestic studies have varied to a degree, but the general consensus is that greater availability of firearms correlates with higher rates of lethal violence, depending on the cause of mortality and the type of geographic areas compared. Thus, to begin with murders, a 2009 study determined that “gun ownership rates have a positive effect on homicide rates” in a state-by-state comparison.⁴⁸ As a result, the author argued that reductions in gun ownership would likely reduce murders overall, a conclusion consistent with the fact that firearms account for approximately two-thirds of all homicides in the United States.⁴⁹ These results were amplifications of earlier studies that had determined that owning a gun increased an individual gun owner’s likelihood of being murdered in their own home, making this tragic outcome nearly three times as likely to occur as it was in households without a gun.⁵⁰ In the 2009 study, overall murder rates at the state level (rather than individual risks) were similarly elevated in connection with household gun ownership rates, but the effects were determined to be of a small magnitude.⁵¹

In contrast, a broad-based 2014 study of the relationship between gun ownership and homicide rates across all states between 1981 and 2010 found “a robust relationship between higher levels of gun ownership and higher firearm homicide rates” for which other control variables could not account.⁵² The “substantial” correlation translated into a 12.9 percent effect on the firearm homicide rate for each standard deviation shift in gun ownership, as measured by a standard proxy statistic. The study’s reliance on a proxy for gun ownership—again, a necessary concession to the limited data on actual gun ownership rates—led the authors to include a note of caution about the potential disconnect between their conclusions and the effects of actual gun ownership rates. Controlled comparisons with direct survey data on gun ownership, however, indicated that the actual impact could be even more extreme than the proxy measures indicated.⁵³

⁴⁸ Gius, “The Effect of Gun Ownership Rates,” 1689.

⁴⁹ Gius, “The Effect of Gun Ownership Rates,” 1689.

⁵⁰ Arthur L. Kellerman, Frederick P. Rivara, Norman B. Rushforth, Joyce G. Banton, Donald T. Reay, Jerry T. Francisco, Ana B. Locci, Janice Prodzinski, Bela B. Hackman, and Grant Somes, “Gun Ownership as a Risk Factor for Homicide in the Home,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 329, no. 15 (October 7, 1993): 1087. The difference was due primarily “to a substantially greater risk of homicide at the hands of a family member or intimate acquaintance” (1090).

⁵¹ Gius, “The Effect of Gun Ownership Rates,” 1690.

⁵² Michael Siegel, Craig S. Ross, and Charles King III, “The Relationship between Gun Ownership and Firearm Homicide Rates in the United States, 1981–2010,” *American Journal of Public Health* 103, no. 11 (November 2013): 2098, quote at 2102.

⁵³ Siegel, Ross, and King, “Relationship,” 2103.

Other earlier studies found even stronger correlations between gun ownership and homicide rates, and one study of county-level data even addressed the question of causation by ruling out the possibility that gun ownership increased as a result of higher homicide rates.⁵⁴

More recently, an additional study has added nuance to these correlations, suggesting that the links between gun ownership and homicide rates are particular to certain types of murders. By separating murders by victims' relationships to their killers, a team of researchers found that a state's gun ownership rates had a direct correlation with murders committed by family members or an intimate partner but not "nondomestic homicides."⁵⁵ As with the 2014 study, this link was substantial, as "states with the highest firearm ownership had a 64.6% higher incidence rate of domestic firearm homicide relative to states with lower firearm ownership rates."⁵⁶ This study suggests that the frequently observed relationship between gun ownership rates and homicide rates is an artifact of the increase in domestic violence deaths that translates into an aggregate increase in the overall murder rate, although the study's lead author also acknowledged that this does not rule out a link between gun availability more generally (rather than gun ownership) and nondomestic homicides.⁵⁷ Even if the correlation is exclusively restricted to domestic homicides, though, this still represents a significant way in which firearm availability impacts the distribution of lethal violence, making the links between gun ownership and homicide rates morally consequential. This is particularly true given the magnitude of the impact identified in cases of domestic homicide and the structural factors involved in domestic violence victimization rates described above. An intervention that could significantly reduce domestic violence deaths is therefore an opportunity Catholics ought to pursue eagerly as a result of their commitment to solidarity in the face of structural sin.

⁵⁴ Siegel, Ross, and King specifically compare their results with Matthew Miller, Deborah Azrael, and David Hemenway, "Rates of Household Firearm Ownership and Homicide across US Regions and States, 1988–1997," *American Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 12 (2002): 1988–1993. For the causality study, see Anthony Hoskin, "Household Gun Prevalence and Rates of Violent Crime: A Test of Competing Gun Theories," *Criminal Justice Studies* 24, no. 1 (2011): 125–136. In their own study, Siegel, Ross, and King suggest reverse causality is unlikely based on their dataset but also admit that they could not determine causation ("Relationship," 2103).

⁵⁵ Aaron J. Kivisto, Lauren A. Magee, Peter L. Phalen, and Bradley R. Ray, "Firearm Ownership and Domestic Versus Nondomestic Homicide in the US," *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 57, no. 3 (September 2019): 313.

⁵⁶ Kivisto, Magee, Phalen, and Ray, "Firearm Ownership," 319.

⁵⁷ Aaron Kivisto quoted in Sarah Mervosh, "Gun Ownership Rates Tied to Domestic Homicides, but Not Other Killings, Study Finds," *New York Times*, July 22, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/07/22/us/gun-ownership-violence-statistics.html.

Beyond murders, the availability of firearms has also been shown to affect the distribution of other types of lethal violence within the United States, just as it does internationally. Suicide rates, for example, are connected to gun ownership rates even more strongly than homicide rates. A 2002 study expanding upon research linking the availability of a gun in the home with elevated suicide risks found significant correlations between household gun ownership rates at the state and regional level and the suicide rate.⁵⁸ A later study by the same authors and an additional collaborator found a similar relationship, estimating that a 10 percentage point decrease in gun ownership at the regional level would translate into a 2.5 percent reduction in total suicides via a 4.2 percent reduction in firearm suicides.⁵⁹ Subsequent studies have confirmed the same type of correlation, repeatedly demonstrating in cross-sectional comparisons with diverse controlled variables that firearm availability has a direct statistical relationship with suicide rates.⁶⁰

Overall, these data reveal that firearm availability has a measurable impact on the distribution of lethal violence when suicide is the cause of death. Nevertheless, the particular features of the correlation raise further questions. Specifically, the fact that gun ownership rates have stronger effects on firearm suicides than on overall suicides raises the possibility that a reduction in firearm prevalence simply leads people who want to commit suicide to find other means, thereby suggesting that a reduction in gun ownership rates would not have much effect on the actual distribution of lethal violence. Two factors militate against this conclusion, however. First, gun ownership rates still have a statistically significant effect on overall suicide rates, indicating that a

⁵⁸ Matthew Miller, Deborah Azrael, and David Hemenway, "Household Firearm Ownership and Suicide Rates in the United States," *Epidemiology* 13, no. 5 (September 2002): 521. For one example of the earlier studies on the links between gun ownership and individual suicide rates, see A. L. Kellermann, F. P. Rivara, G. Somes, D. T. Reay, J. Francisco, J. G. Banton, J. Prodzinski, C. Fligner, and B. B. Hackman, "Suicide in the Home in Relation to Gun Ownership," *New England Journal of Medicine* 327, no. 7 (August 13, 1992): 467–472.

⁵⁹ Matthew Miller, Deborah Azrael, David Hemenway, and Steven J. Lippmann, "The Association between Changes in Household Firearm Ownership and Rates of Suicide in the United States, 1981–2002," *Injury Prevention* 12, no. 3 (June 2006): 180.

⁶⁰ Augustine J. Kposowa, "Association of Suicide Rates, Gun Ownership, Conservatism, and Individual Suicide Risk," *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 48, no. 9 (2013): 1437–1474; Matthew Miller, Catherine Barber, Richard A. White, and Deborah Azrael, "Firearms and Suicide in the United States: Is Risk Independent of Underlying Suicidal Behavior?," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 178, no. 6 (September 15, 2013): 948–951; Augustine J. Kposowa, David Hamilton, and Katy Wang, "Impact of Firearm Availability and Gun Regulations on State Suicide Rates," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 46, no. 6 (December 2011): 688–689.

reduction in firearm availability can reduce this form of lethal violence, likely because “substitution appears to be incomplete” for those who do not have access to a firearm but would consider suicide by other means.⁶¹ Second, the aforementioned fact that guns are the most lethal suicide method means that even if substitution were to occur 100 percent of the time, fewer firearms would still mean fewer deaths.⁶² Policies reducing firearm availability can thus serve as an act of care for those whose battles with despair and mental illness make suicide seem like the only choice, representing another way Catholics can answer the call to love their neighbor.

Finally, unintentional deaths are also affected by firearm availability. A 2001 study evaluating data on unintentional deaths from 1979 to 1997 found that “a disproportionately high number [of victims of accidental firearm deaths] died in states where guns were more prevalent,” resulting in “a robust, positive, and statistically significant association . . . between gun availability in a given state and that state’s level of unintentional firearm deaths.”⁶³ The authors found a statistically significant correlation even when controlling for other variables, like poverty or urban density, that would seem to affect firearm deaths and determined that the risk of unintentional firearm death was 10 times greater in the states with the highest level of firearm availability than it was in states with the lowest prevalence of guns.⁶⁴ A subsequent review of variations in state-level firearm death rates likewise determined that firearm availability had a direct correlation with unintentional firearm deaths, but only at a level “approaching significance.”⁶⁵ As these authors note, however, this is still an important correlation to consider in the evaluation of gun policies, particularly because firearm availability has a clear effect on homicides and suicides and has a dramatic effect on unintentional gun

⁶¹ Miller, Azrael, and Hemenway, “Household Firearm Ownership,” 523.

⁶² For more on the lethality of different suicide methods and the ways this variation impacts the relationship between firearm availability and the overall suicide rate, see Miller, Barber, White, and Azrael, “Firearms and Suicide,” 951–952.

⁶³ Matthew Miller, Deborah Azrael, and David Hemenway, “Firearm Availability and Unintentional Firearm Deaths,” *Accident Analysis and Prevention* 33, no. 4 (July 2001): 479.

⁶⁴ Miller, Azrael, and Hemenway, “Firearm Availability,” 480. These results align with studies showing that household gun ownership increases an individual’s risk of unintentional firearm death. Douglas J. Wiebe, “Firearms in US Homes as a Risk Factor for Unintentional Gunshot Fatality,” *Accident Analysis and Prevention* 35, no. 5 (September 2003): 711–716.

⁶⁵ James H. Price, Amy J. Thompson, and Joseph A. Dake, “Factors Associated with State Variations in Homicide, Suicide, and Unintentional Firearm Deaths,” *Journal of Community Health* 29, no. 4 (August 2004): 281; see also 277, 280.

deaths when focusing on childhood victims.⁶⁶ Given that children are the demographic group with the highest risk of accidental firearm death, it is not hard to imagine how a reduction in firearm availability could translate into a reduction in unintentional deaths for those most vulnerable to these tragic accidents.⁶⁷

Across these international and domestic studies, then, a consistent pattern comes into view: firearm availability has a consequential relationship with gun deaths. As Catholics consider how they wish to respond to the epidemic of gun violence in the United States, with all the entanglements in structural sin that this current state of affairs entails, they can begin to build a productive, prudential response on the basis of these empirical insights. More precisely, they can use this information to better judge potential public policy solutions, aiming to identify the legal changes that would affect firearm availability in the most effective ways. Of course, as this effort unfolds, epistemic humility will be an essential virtue.⁶⁸ After all, few of the studies were able to determine causality because of the nature of the available datasets, although—again—some did suggest a causal link and those that could address reverse causality all ruled out the possibility that higher rates of gun deaths lead to a greater prevalence of firearms. In light of the earlier comments about certainty and empirical data, these links form a sufficient basis for policy considerations, particularly given the moral obligation Catholics have to challenge the status quo on gun violence. The final part of this article uses these empirical trends to establish some concrete policies that would affect firearm availability in ways most likely to yield the reduction in gun deaths that Catholic theological commitments demand.

CONCRETE POLICY PROPOSALS: COUNTERACTING THE STATUS QUO MOST EFFECTIVELY

On an intuitive level, the most obvious way to apply the links between firearm availability and firearm mortality in order to reduce gun deaths would seem to be through laws restricting firearm ownership. The shift from this empirical relationship to public policy is not quite so straightforward, however. Although there is some

⁶⁶ Price, Thompson, and Dake, “Factors Associated with State Variations,” 280, 281. For the impact of firearm availability on unintentional firearm deaths among children, Price, Thompson, and Dake point to Matthew Miller, Deborah Azrael, and David Hemenway, “Firearm Availability and Unintentional Firearm Deaths, Suicide, and Homicide among 5–14 Year Olds,” *Journal of Trauma*, 52, no. 2 (2002): 267–275.

⁶⁷ Fowler, Dahlberg, Haileyesus, Guiterrez, and Bacon, “Childhood Firearm Injuries,” 8.

⁶⁸ On the value and function of epistemic humility, see Lisa A. Fullam, *The Virtue of Humility: A Thomistic Apologetic* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 2009), esp. 135–173.

evidence that stricter gun control laws in the aggregate can in fact yield the sorts of reductions in gun deaths Catholics should prioritize, there are a wide array of gun control policies and not all of them have the same effect.⁶⁹ If the goal is to reduce the number of gun deaths, particularly for those geographic areas and demographic groups most at risk, a multipronged approach will be necessary. Specifically, Catholics interested in counteracting the status quo on gun violence will need to pursue changes in policies affecting gun sales and storage in order to address the damaging link between gun availability and gun deaths. They will also need to resist efforts to loosen existing gun laws, for these changes tend to have the most negative effects on gun deaths.

To begin, one of the most popular gun control proposals at the moment—universal background checks—can play an important role in efforts to challenge the distribution of lethal firearm violence.⁷⁰ A comprehensive review of multiple studies examining background check laws found that mandatory background checks reduced firearm homicides, in some cases by as much as 40 percent. One study included in the review evaluated the opposite effect, where a strict background check law (enforced via a requirement to procure a permit in order to purchase a gun) was repealed, and identified a 29 percent increase in the statewide firearm-homicide rate.⁷¹ Laws ensuring that gun sales only occur alongside a background check therefore represent an important policy tool to counteract the unjust distribution of deaths by firearm homicide, which disproportionately affect communities of color, by reducing not only the overall availability of firearms but also the ease with which someone can access them. A simple background check law will not be a panacea, however, because the effectiveness of these laws depends on the strength and comprehensiveness of the lists used in the background check itself. For example, when the background check process includes consulting a list of restraining

⁶⁹ Julian Santaella-Tenorio, Magdalena Cerdá, Andrés Villaveces, and Sandra Galea, “What Do We Know about the Association between Firearm Legislation and Firearm-Related Injuries?,” *Epidemiological Review* 38, no. 1 (January 2016): 152; Elinore J. Kaufman, Christopher N. Morrison, Charles C. Branas, and Douglas J. Wiebe, “State Firearm Laws and Interstate Firearm Deaths from Homicide and Suicide in the United States,” *JAMA Internal Medicine* 178, no. 5 (May 2018): 692–700.

⁷⁰ On popular support for expanding background checks across the political spectrum, see “Amid a Series of Mass Shootings.”

⁷¹ Lois K. Lee, Eric W. Fleegler, Caitlin Farrell, Elorm Avakame, Saranya Srinivasan, David Hemenway, and Michael C. Monuteaux, “Firearm Laws and Firearm Homicides: A Systematic Review,” *JAMA Internal Medicine* 177, no. 1 (January 2017): 116. For the repeal study, see Daniel Webster, Cassandra Kercher Crifasi, and Jon S. Vernick, “Effects of the Repeal of Missouri’s Handgun Purchaser Licensing Law on Homicides,” *Journal of Urban Health* 91, no. 2 (April 2014): 293–302. The reported increase of 29.4 percent was reduced to 23 percent when controlling for other variables.

orders and not just criminal convictions, gun deaths from intimate partner violence decrease.⁷² In light of this evidence, Catholics can confidently pursue a reduction in firearm access through the implementation of strict background checks for all gun sales in order to challenge the disproportionate burden of lethal firearm violence on women and communities of color.

Second, Catholics must also consider additional gun control policies to address the strikingly high rates of suicide in the United States, as well as the risks of accidental deaths afflicting children especially. Although background check laws are effective at reducing homicides, they so far appear to have no substantive effect on suicides, although if they eventually did reduce the number of guns in circulation and not just the speed at which guns are acquired, background check laws would have a sizeable impact on suicides as well.⁷³ Given that many suicides, particularly firearm suicides, are impulsive, some have suggested that a waiting period to purchase guns could be an effective remedy that would reduce suicides by allowing one's initial suicidal impulses enough time to dissipate.⁷⁴ While these laws can be effective in some circumstances, most firearm suicides involve guns purchased years in advance, so "it is more important for suicide prevention to restrict access to already owned guns by depressed suicidal persons than it is to prevent them from purchasing a gun."⁷⁵ This can be achieved by the so-called red flag laws that allow law enforcement to confiscate firearms from certain at-risk individuals. These laws introduce a useful law enforcement tool, but they must be implemented carefully to ensure they do not create the sort of stigmatization of mental illness making treatment less likely.⁷⁶

The best resource to limit access in a manner that can prevent suicides, then, is to enforce safe storage practices, a strategy that will also have the greatest impact on accidental gun deaths. A number of laws target safe gun storage by requiring guns to be stored unloaded and unlocked or in locked containers, and a review of multiple studies on these requirements has found a decrease in suicides and accidental deaths, particularly among children, and has established the strongest

⁷² Santaella-Tenorio, Cerdá, Villaveces, and Galea, "What Do We Know?," 147–148.

⁷³ David Hamilton and Augustine J. Kposowa, "Firearms and Violent Death in the United States: Gun Ownership, Gun Control, and Mortality Rates in 16 States, 2005–2009," *British Journal of Education, Society, and Behavioral Science* 7, no. 2 (2015): 94; J. John Mann and Christina A. Michel, "Prevention of Firearm Suicide in the United States: What Works and What is Possible," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 173, no. 10 (October 2016): 971, see also 975.

⁷⁴ Kposowa, Hamilton, and Wang, "Impact of Firearm Availability," 694.

⁷⁵ Mann and Michel, "Prevention of Firearm Suicide," 973.

⁷⁶ Mann and Michel, "Prevention of Firearm Suicide," 973.

decreases in states with the harshest penalties for violations.⁷⁷ These safe storage laws, coupled with clear education about the requirements, can significantly help address the role of firearms in suicide and accidental death. The effectiveness of these strategies will still hinge on compliance. To address this challenge, personalization technologies, like fingerprint locks, can ensure that guns are not accidentally or intentionally discharged by someone other than the permitted owner, removing a significant number of suicides and accidental deaths.⁷⁸ Together, these access laws can lower suicide rates and lead to fewer accidental deaths, serving as an appropriate Catholic response to the ways these types of lethal gun violence disproportionately affect two marginalized groups. If fingerprint locks are readily and cheaply available as a retrofit option, perhaps as part of a public health initiative, the impact of this particular policy could be dramatic.

Finally, beyond thinking about the pursuit of new laws that can reduce the number of gun deaths and thereby address the maldistribution of firearm lethal violence, Catholics must also consider the ways proposals to loosen gun restrictions can affect this structural problem. After all, some have championed easier access to guns as a response to concerns about firearm violence, usually employing the premise that gun possession can have a deterrent effect on would-be gun criminals.⁷⁹ Overall, the empirical evidence indicates that loosening restrictions on gun ownership and gun access does not lead to a reduction in gun deaths, a result consistent with the link between firearm availability and firearm mortality.⁸⁰ When these legal expansions take the form of “stand your ground laws,” which make it easier for someone to avoid legal liability if they can assert that they killed a person in a broadly defined notion of “self-defense,” the effects are even more pronounced, yielding a dramatic increase in homicide rates overall and firearm homicide rates in particular.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Santaella-Tenorio, Cerdá, Villaveces, and Galea, “What Do We Know?,” 149.

⁷⁸ Mann and Michel, “Prevention of Firearm Suicide,” 976–977. These technologies could also help address the fact that safe storage laws on their own do not affect gun homicide rates (Lee, Fleegler, Farrell, Avakame, Srinivasan, Hemenway, and Monuteaux, “Firearm Laws and Firearm Homicides,” 116–117).

⁷⁹ Notably, legal changes making gun access easier were the most common state-level response to the 2012 elementary school massacre in Newtown, Connecticut. See Steven P. Lanza, “The Effect of Firearm Restrictions on Gun-Related Homicides across US States,” *Applied Economics Letters* 21, no. 13 (2014): 902.

⁸⁰ Lanza, “Effect of Firearm Restrictions,” 904–905; see also Webster, Crifasi, and Vernick, “Effects of the Repeal.”

⁸¹ David K. Humphreys, Antonio Gasparrini, and Douglas J. Wiebe, “Evaluating the Impact of Florida’s ‘Stand Your Ground’ Self-Defense Law on Homicide and Suicide by Firearm: An Interrupted Time Series Study,” *JAMA Internal Medicine* 177, no. 1 (2017): 44–50. Santaella-Tenorio, Cerdá, Villaveces, and Galea, “What Do We

Given both of these implications, and in light of the ways Catholics should respond to the well-established empirical connection between firearm availability and gun deaths, Catholics ought to take an active role in resisting changes that would loosen gun laws. While this is an important contribution to the public policy debate about gun control, it is especially incumbent in the case of stand your ground laws, which go beyond their general effects on homicide rates to reinforce distrust between white individuals and people of color and endanger young black and brown men in particular.⁸² Out of both a genuine commitment to solidarity in the face of structural sin and a deep and abiding commitment to the inherent, equal dignity of each human person made in the image and likeness of God, Catholics must reject this pursuit of a false sense of security and instead enter into debates about gun control policy with an eye toward reducing the prevalence of and access to firearms. The common good demands nothing less.

Naturally, there will likely be resistance to these concrete proposals, even among faithful Catholics. After all, some of these links between gun laws and reduced gun deaths are not 100 percent certain, and questions of causality remain. Given the broader public discourse about guns, meanwhile, some will likely balk at the idea that there should be additional legal restrictions on firearm ownership because they view this as infringing on the rights of gun owners. However predictable, neither of these concerns provides a sufficient objection to halt Catholic support for the policy proposals just discussed. First, the identified impacts of these particular gun laws on gun deaths are all more likely than not, and most have likely impacts at significant levels. According to the interpretations of certainty described above, this is more than enough evidence for a prudential judgment, for as Thomas Aquinas explains, when “experience reduces the infinity of [possible outcomes] to a certain finite number which occur as a general rule ... the knowledge of these suffices for human prudence” (ST II-II q. 47, a. 3, ad 2). Because the beneficial correlations of background checks and safe storage laws and the harmful correlations of looser restrictions on gun deaths have all been established by data indicating they occur as a general rule, Catholics ought not insist on an even higher degree of certainty for their prudential judgments about advocating for the first two policies and against the last, particularly given the stakes involved. Rather than demonstrating prudence, a refusal to act in this case would indicate a

Know?,” 152, although these authors did report one outlier study finding a decrease after the introduction of a stand your ground type law (146).

⁸² For more on the ways stand your ground laws reflect a broader culture eroding the equal dignity of all regardless of race, see Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*.

callous, even if unintentional, disregard for the human lives lost under the status quo. Instead, Catholics can, and as a matter of prudence should, use the current empirical insights to pursue these policy changes as an extension of their theological commitments to solidarity and neighborly love.

Second, although the question of rights may be attractive in the current political context, from a Catholic perspective, its appeal is deceptive because it relies on a reductionistic view. Much of the contemporary discourse on gun laws revolves around appeals to the “right ... to keep and bear Arms” described in the US Constitution’s Second Amendment. Some gun rights advocates read this language in absolutist terms, but Catholics are called to approach this and other rights claims from a more nuanced perspective. This right is a legal one, not a natural one, and therefore like all laws it must be ordered to the common good if it is to have any true authority (ST I-II q. 96, a. 4). The common good must account for “the good of all and of each individual” (see again *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38), which means that the legal right to bear arms cannot trump the natural right to life that the empirical evidence indicates is at risk from an absolutist application. Moreover, the Catholic social teaching understanding that rights always entail responsibilities (*Compendium*, no. 156) further rebuts an absolutist interpretation. In fact, this presupposition suggests that those committed to a right to keep and bear firearms must consider their responsibilities to ensure that this right is not exercised in ways that undermine the common good. The current empirical data on the links between gun ownership and gun deaths indicate, unfortunately, that this right is often exercised in just such a fashion. Pursuing universal background checks, ensuring safe storage, and resisting a dramatic loosening of firearm restrictions all represent a reasonable form of responsibility accompanying any right to bear arms. Even if one still imagines that this involves a conflict of competing rights, the Catholic commitment to the common good puts this competition in perspective, because one’s right to a *sense* of safety (the chief rationale gun owners cite for acquiring guns) is not a justification to overrule another’s right to be safe (what lax gun laws require those disproportionately burdened with gun deaths to sacrifice). Ultimately, Catholics have significant reasons to promote the policies outlined here, and little reason to oppose them, based on both the current empirical data and perennial Catholic theological commitments.

CONCLUSION

The main point of this article has been to demonstrate that Catholics can meet the challenges of gun violence in the United States with the kind of prudential judgment their faith requires for engagement in public life. By acknowledging the uneven distribution

of firearm lethal violence and its entanglement with structures of sin, Catholics can recognize the need to do something to counteract the status quo. By evaluating empirical data on the links between firearm availability and gun deaths, Catholics can identify a path toward structural reform. Finally, by assessing specific policy proposals in light of an overarching commitment to reduce gun deaths out of a concern for the common good, and with a desire to correct the maldistribution of lethal violence, Catholics can navigate concrete policies and advocate for the most impactful changes. In this way, Catholic convictions can yield a more nuanced approach to the complicated and overly partisan question of how to handle gun violence in the United States, providing resources and rationale for an active form of public engagement on an issue that merges Catholic concerns for life and social justice. Notably, nothing in this evaluation is meant to suggest that these policies are the only ones Catholics should pursue. On the contrary, there is ample evidence that a complete transformation of the current gun violence epidemic will require more than just a few policy changes in isolation.⁸³ Nevertheless, as an application of Catholicism's constant promotion of the common good and with the insights of empirical data, these policies represent an important minimum that can serve as a springboard for the continual development of a comprehensive response to gun violence. The Catholic defense of life at all its stages demands nothing less.

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⁸³ Abt, *Bleeding Out*, 140.