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OPINION
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Dear gun control advocates: Gun owners are your allies

They – and only they – have the power to make this country safer from gun violence

January 28, 2015 2:00AM ET

by **Dan Baum** (</profiles/b/dan-baum.htm>)



Guns in Schools: Gun control debate, stalled in DC, picks up in the states

Even as gun control slips from federal agenda, advocates say they have scored victories and support at the state level

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Our gun politics are broken because we're trying to do the wrong thing. Instead of keeping guns out of the wrong hands or getting military-style weapons off our streets, we should be trying to see to it that fewer people get shot — because that, ultimately, is what matters. Framed this way, the gun issue looks entirely different, and some opportunities open up.

Seventy or eighty years ago, we could have made choices that would have left us today with fewer guns in private hands. But we didn't, and now, with as many as 300 million firearms in circulation, it's too late to try to decrease gun violence by tinkering with what happens in gun stores. Better background checks, magazine size limits and assault-rifle bans cannot achieve the only outcome that matters — fewer people getting shot — because just about everybody who wants a gun already has one or several, and those who develop the desire can easily acquire them without going near a gun store.



Guns in Schools: Psychologists say defense measures could traumatize kids

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Timeline: School shootings since Sandy Hook

This is not to say nothing can be done. First of all, we've already done a lot. The rate of gun violence is about half what it was 20 years ago; it's one of the few unalloyed public-policy successes of our time. In those 20 years, gun laws grew looser almost everywhere, and the number of guns in circulation soared. So whatever brought down the crime rate, it wasn't gun control. Still, the rate of gun violence in the United States is embarrassingly and heartbreakingly high. We must do more.

The people we need to reach if we're really going to reduce gun violence are the people who own the guns. They're the ones — not legislators or gun-store clerks — who decide what happens with the nation's firearms. If a child finds a gun and kills himself or a playmate or a teenager commits suicide or worse with a gun, it's because a gun owner let it happen. Felons, wife beaters and the adjudicated insane can't buy guns legally, so when they get ahold of them, it's because law-abiding gun owners let it happen, sometimes by providing guns outright, sometimes by using their

Incidents of firearms discharged at K–12 schools in the US, with staff or students involved, since December 2012

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clean records to make straw purchases and often by leaving them unsecured where thieves can get them. The last time it was studied, researchers found that as many as three-quarters of the guns criminals use are stolen.

“ Even though locking up their guns is in their interest, a lot of my fellow gun owners refuse precisely because the ‘gun grabbers’ demand that they do so.”

Thus the single most important thing we can do to reduce the number of people who get shot is to get gun owners to lock up their guns. It wouldn't prevent every tragedy, but zero unsecured guns means zero child accidents, zero teenage catastrophes, zero stolen

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guns. No other measure has the potential so vastly to reduce the number of people who get shot.

So how do we get gun owners to secure their guns? It's tempting to say, "There oughta be a law," and 28 states and the District of Columbia require gun owners to keep their guns under lock and key or face extra penalties if their unsecured guns are used in a crime or accident. Such laws are well intentioned, but they produce the opposite effect of the one we want. Especially in the current political climate, gun owners deeply resent being ordered to do anything. So even though locking up their guns is in their interest — guns are expensive, after all — a lot of my fellow gun owners refuse precisely because the "gun grabbers" demand that they do so. That may seem irrational or repellent, but that's how it is. And if we're going to change people's behavior, we need to meet them where they are.

The nation needs gun culture to change from within, to make it as socially unacceptable to leave a gun unsecured as it is, say, to smoke in another person's house. The

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initiative to begin that transformation has to come from gun owners themselves, and several such efforts are underway. Outsiders can't force it to happen, and in fact gun owners won't begin to examine their behavior as long as the rest of the country is harassing them with restrictive, ineffective and, from the gun owner's point of view, insulting laws. Memo to my fellow Democrats: If we want to see fewer people get shot, let's lay off the legislative switch for a while and give gun culture a chance to examine itself and do the right thing.

I know how counterintuitive this appears. Why should gun owners get a free pass? Why should they, who, by leaving guns around where children, teenagers, lunatics and criminals can get them — who really are a problem, in other words — be treated like anything but? But this isn't about what's fair. It's about seeing to it that fewer people get shot, which is a much more important goal than sticking it to the National Rifle Association or scoring political points.

Gun control is predicated on the notion that gun owners are a problem, when really we need to see them as an asset. They are the keepers of the civilian arsenal. They — and only they — have the power to make this country safer from gun violence. You may not like guns, and you may not like the people who like guns. But if you're horrified by gun violence and want to see it reduced, gun owners are the best allies you have.

Dan Baum is the author of "Gun Guys: A Road Trip (http://www.amazon.com/Gun-Guys-Road-Vintage-Departures/dp/0307742504/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1421952597&sr=8-3&keywords=Dan+Baum), "Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans (http://www.amazon.com/Nine-Lives-Mystery-Magic-Orleans/dp/0385523203/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1421952597&sr=8-1&keywords=Dan+Baum&pebp=1421952672964&peasin=385523203)," "Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure (http://www.amazon.com/Smoke-Mirrors-Drugs-Politics-Failure/dp/0316084468/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1421952597&sr=8-2&keywords=Dan+Baum)" and "Citizen Coors: An American Dynasty (http://www.amazon.com/Citizen-Coors-American-Dan-Baum/dp/0688154484/ref=sr_1_5?ie=UTF8&qid=1421952597&sr=8-5&keywords=Dan+Baum)." He covered the military, the Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina as a staff writer for *The New Yorker*. He has been a reporter for *The Anchorage Times*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *the Asian Wall Street Journal* and *The Wall Street Journal*.