

*How should Americans and their elected representatives think about these very thorny issues?*

### **Prerequisites to a Safer World**

We shy away from nuance because we think it makes us vulnerable. We avoid open dialogue because it forces substance in place of easy, empty words. We stick with the same old legislative proposals because familiarity is comforting. When it comes to gun violence, we're stuck in our ways. Indeed, anyone paying attention has long been familiar with the endless, post-tragedy discourse:

*Stop politicizing gun violence. Let the families mourn. This is a wake-up call.*

*Give teachers guns and schools metal detectors – fold-out walls – jagged lockers*

*– thoughts and prayers.*

Our heated standstill has no time to lose. According to the Gun Violence Archive, there have already been over 10,000 gun violence deaths and 130 mass shootings in 2023 (GVA). The news cycle can't keep up. Nobody can. Most people agree change is necessary, but successful legislation comes from productive discussion, and we simply don't know how to talk. I won't espouse common policies because, lacking mutual understanding and good faith, they'll fall on deaf ears. Instead, I believe there are three urgent prerequisites we must accept to think productively about gun violence: open dialogue, specific nuance, and atypical solutions.

### **Creating Dialogue**

We don't have a national dialogue on gun violence; we have slogans and shouting matches. Proper dialogue requires a collaborative mindset, genuine questioning, and fleshed-out specifics. This lack of dialogue isn't entirely our fault – structural obstacles have historically

prevented in-depth conversations. As citizens interested in change, it's our responsibility to recognize and resist these barriers.

For one example, Eric Westervelt of NPR notes that before 2021, the CDC was not permitted to research gun violence; the gun lobby “effectively blocked federal funding” (Westervelt). From this, we can first recognize why many statistics are murky and misleading. As Westervelt explains, “‘disordered and highly segmented’ collection systems have created chronically unreliable data” (Westervelt). Second, we can take advantage of the new research being done by legitimate organizations, including but not limited to the CDC; by backing up our claims with scientific evidence, we can show nonpartisanship while facilitating a more substantive conversation.

There are also parties intentionally obstructing the political process. Rukmani Bhatia writes for the Center for American Progress, “The NRA’s political power rests on its ability to embed a narrative about gun ownership.” Indeed, “it exploits and expands the political divisions... in an effort to discredit the work that is being done by gun violence prevention advocates” (Bhatia). As distant as the ideas may seem, media literacy is crucial to fostering productive dialogue; trusting our sources requires recognizing the motives behind them.

Take advantage of the CDC’s new research; start conversations about gun violence with neighbors, family, and friends, but then stop if they become damaging; research your sources; tell your legislators via phone or mail that slogans aren’t policy. We cannot improve ideas

without fleshing them out through open dialogue, and we can't have dialogue without discarding unscientific and biased narratives.

### Finding Nuance

Accepting nuance requires giving concessions to the other side – you must admit there's validity in the opposing argument. In that way, it must be reciprocal. If I admit there's room for compromise while you maintain your solution is the only way forward, only *my* voice gets diminished. This lack of nuance pigeonholes our beliefs, taking away our ability for in-depth analysis and forcing us to stick to talking points.

Try this exercise.

Democrats,

Ask a Republican: *should someone be allowed to own a nuclear warhead?* Ask then: *what about a surface-to-air missile?* Finally, *why is an AR-15 any different?*

Republicans,

Ask a Democrat: *can a single mother in a sketchy neighborhood keep a baseball bat under her bed?* Ask then: *what about a knife in her purse?* Finally, *why is a personal firearm any different?*

There is a compromise; we just haven't been looking. Finding the nuance in this discussion breaks us out of a mindset of *winning* and ushers in one of *collaboration*. Our habits hold us back – as Bhatia illustrates, the dominant narrative has been intentionally stripped of nuance “to develop a convincing narrative that can be shared widely” (Bhatia). However, there is common ground most people agree on. By identifying and building off of it, we can explore specifics, discover the core of disagreements, and tackle the common threat of gun violence with a more productive, cooperation-based model.

### Experimentation

While many age-old legislative proposals have merit, most will never see the light of day exclusively because of their political past. If nuance and dialogue fail, we can still look to unfamiliar policies not traditionally associated with politics to find a way forward.

For example, one critically overlooked solution is thorough education. In a 2021 report, Everytown Research reveals that “in 77 percent of [school gun violence] incidents, other people were aware of the shooter's plans in advance” (ETR). By funding threat protocol systems and creating organized anonymous reporting, we can develop systematic awareness that prevents tragedies days before they happen. In the long term, the University of Virginia reports that a “removal of legal barriers to sharing safety-related information among educational, mental health, and law enforcement agencies” would greatly reduce the risk of threatening action going unnoticed (UVA).

Alternative policies aren't limited to education. ETR lists several other preventative measures, such as Extreme Risk Laws, which allow family members or law enforcement to prevent a person from obtaining weapons through a court order. Others include child access prevention laws, efficient intervention systems, and changes in schooling culture (ETR). There are solutions out there, and we have to be more proactive in experimentation; we'll never break national gridlock by staying in place.

My generation faces an awful discordance between what we see happening and what we see being discussed. In order to escape this bleak and repetitive national brawl, we must collaborate as citizens through nuanced dialogue and nonpartisan solutions. Stronger, preventative action must supersede just another backpack thrown when the shooter opens the door.

## Works Cited

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