

# Christians: Reconsider Gun Reform

By Jonathan Waldroup, May 2022

## Introduction

In the last two weeks, not one but two tragedies unfolded, as 19 children, 2 teachers, and 10 grocery shoppers were massacred in cold blood by murderous gunmen in Buffalo, NY and Uvalde, TX. It is horrible when anyone dies in such a manner, but the death of children is particularly terrible, and as a parent with three young children, I cannot imagine the pain of the families who lost loved ones. There are no words to express the horror of such wanton violence, and my prayers are truly with the families of those who died in both places.

It is right to grieve, but when heinous acts occur, we cannot help but wonder if something could have prevented them. This is an appropriate response, coming from our common humanity and empathy with the pain of others. Christians are called to love our neighbors (in fact, even our enemies!), but we cannot claim to love anyone if we look upon their pain and do not desire to ameliorate it. So we must look for solutions.

Guns have been a controversial topic for my entire life, and the debates continue to grow more rancorous as the country becomes more politically divided. While the debates about constitutional interpretation and the efficacy of guns as means to resist tyranny continue, these two topics seem less important than they once were. The populace has largely accepted that the ability to own a gun is a reasonable or at least unavoidable aspect of American life, and are not especially interested in arguing about constitutional theory. So the most basic questions about gun rights are relatively static, and guns will remain a part of American life for better or worse.

But the ongoing presence of guns does not mean we should accept the levels of gun violence we have in America today. And this is where other arguments begin to come out from gun advocates, seeking to prevent further gun regulation. Certain arguments are especially common among conservative Christians and I feel need to be addressed. These arguments are, in brief:

1. **The Sin Argument:** Violence is a sin problem, not a gun problem. Thus, the government cannot fix it and should not try.
2. **The Rarity Argument:** Mass shootings are exceedingly rare, so it is misguided to fixate on them and respond with drastic policy changes.
3. **The Policy Argument:** Everyone wants to do something, but no one ever offers specific policy prescriptions, or those policies are ineffective.

Reducing gun violence is a pro-life stance, and thus one that should not be controversial among conservative Christians. But the arguments above regularly entice Christians to write off gun reform or even label it as anti-Christian. In the rest of this article I will look at each of these arguments from a Christian perspective and show why they are illogical and incorrect, with a special focus on the first argument, which also applies to many other discussions among Christians in the realm of politics.

## The Sin Argument

Living among conservative Christians for most of my life, one of the most frequent things I have heard after a mass shooting is some variation on the argument that the problem isn't guns, it's sin:

"Guns don't kill - people do."

"Violence is a sin problem, not a gun problem."

"No government policy can stop people from killing if they are determined to kill."

After this week's shooting, everyone from clergy<sup>1</sup> to politicians to the guy next door has been making this argument, and it was on repeat at the NRA convention. Such arguments are normally accompanied by appeals to not

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<sup>1</sup> I wonder how many of you heard this from your priest or pastor the Sunday after the Uvalde massacre.

politicize the issue, again implying that the solution for the problem does not exist in the political setting. Here is just [one example](#) from this week:

“The problem starts with people. Not with guns.” Alabama Sen. Tommy Tuberville, who holds an A-rating and an endorsement from the NRA, told reporters Wednesday, bluntly summing up the position of many in the GOP, especially considering the party's recent turn further right. "I'm very sorry it happened. But guns are not the problem, OK. People are the problem. That's where it starts. And we've had guns forever, and we're gonna continue to have guns.”

These arguments do contain some truth. It is true that a gun is no danger in the hands of a virtuous person who is also trained to use the gun safely. Virtuous people do not murder. But people deeply distorted by sin do murder, with guns and many other tools as well. So indeed, the root cause of murder is in the heart of the murderer.

However, this argument suffers from an enormous flaw: **even if sin is the root cause of violence (and I agree it is), that does not mean there are no other proximate causes of violence.** And if there are other proximate causes of violence, such as access to a gun, then it is entirely plausible that by addressing the proximate cause, violence could still be prevented. Thus, while government regulation may be (mostly) powerless to deal with a heart full of sin, government regulation may be perfectly suited to prevent violence nonetheless by addressing the proximate cause of the murderer's access to a gun. Therefore, the implication of such arguments that we should not look to government policy to reduce mass shootings is simply incorrect.

### **Christian teaching on the role of government**

Furthermore, this argument is completely out of line with both Christian teaching and the practices of the people who make the argument themselves. To begin with the first point, Christians have always taught that one of the main purposes of government is to restrain evil. According to Christian teaching, it is the government's specific God-ordained duty to restrain evil and promote good. The quintessential teaching comes from Paul, in Romans 13:1-4 (NRSV, emphasis mine):

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval, for it is God's agent for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! *It is the agent of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.*

We see a similar view in 1 Peter 2:13-14:

For the Lord's sake be subject to every human authority, whether to the emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.

The specific wording in both passages refers to punishment, so some might protest that government only gets involved after evil has occurred, and so is not about restraining evil up front. But this is incorrect: in order to punish the evildoer, one must first restrain him. By restraining him, at any point (whether after evil has occurred, or when it is clearly about to occur), the government is preventing likely future evil. One cannot punish a murderer if the murderer is not yet in custody. First, the evil must be restrained, and then it can be punished. So it is surely the duty of government to restrain evil.

In the Old Testament we also see a regular drumbeat in the Psalms and Prophets about God's desire for justice. Providing justice is the duty of those who have been given authority (such as kings and other government powers), and God regularly renders his judgment over those who do not provide justice. So no matter how we read Psalm 82:2-4 (as about divine beings or human beings, which is debated), the key is that those in authority are expected to deliver justice:

How long will you judge unjustly  
and show partiality to the wicked?

Give justice to the weak and the orphan;  
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.  
Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

In fact, the cornerstone story of the Old Testament—the salvation from slavery in Egypt—exemplifies this principle well. There was no urgency to be saved out of Egypt until Pharaoh began to oppress the Israelites (in fact, Egypt had been the location of *salvation* from famine in Canaan in the time of Joseph). It was Pharaoh's injustice that meant it was finally time for God to take his people out of Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land. And after God had given Pharaoh ample warning and chances to act justly, finally God rendered his own judgment on Pharaoh, taking his firstborn son (which is exactly what Pharaoh had done to God—the people of Israel are described as God's own son), and then destroying the armies of Egypt in the Red Sea<sup>2</sup> when Pharaoh changed his mind and tried to recapture the recently freed Israelites. Clearly God was very serious about those in authority governing justly.

So both the Old and New Testaments clearly affirm that government is an appropriate bearer of authority and is primarily concerned with restraining evil and promoting good, that is, with justice. And as we see in Psalm 82, justice is about “delivering the weak and the needy from the hand of the wicked.” Who could be more weak and needy than innocent schoolchildren faced with a gunman?

Thus when evil rears its head, it is fitting that government should step in and do something to restrain it, especially when the evil involves matters of life and death. In fact, it is thoroughly out of touch with Christian teaching to insist that government has no role to play in such instances. Christian tradition has always taught that restraining such evil is the proper role for government.

### **The hypocrisy and absurdity of the sin argument**

A second important piece of evidence that the sin argument is invalid comes from the actions of those who make the argument themselves. Strangely, they seem to forget that sin is also the root cause of all other types of evil, but they are perfectly happy for the government to intervene in other cases.

For example, many pro-gun advocates are also deeply opposed to abortion. These people often strongly support restricting access to abortion clinics, even though they would argue that the root cause of abortion is *also* sin. According to the logic on guns, if something is a sin problem, then there is nothing government can do about it, yet somehow it seems unlikely that we will find Tommy Tuberville saying: “Abortion clinics aren't the problem. People are the problem.” It is only gun violence that gets this special status of a sin problem too deep for the government to mitigate. Regardless of how one feels about abortion<sup>3</sup>, making these opposite arguments about guns and abortion simultaneously is just plain hypocrisy.

The argument makes even less sense when broadened beyond the hot-topic issues of guns and abortion and viewed in historical perspective. Christians believe that literally every human evil is caused by sin. Every single one. That means that all evil action in society is a sin problem, and thus (according to the logic of this argument) government should not restrain *any evil*, because the government is not suited to deal with matters of sin in the heart.

So if someone steals my computer, I am just out of luck, because stealing is a sin problem, and the police surely can't fix sin problems. Or suppose a coach is sexually abusing players on his high school team. I guess we can't get the police involved in that either, because sexual abuse is a sin problem. Or to be even more extreme, I guess it was wrong to fight the Nazis with the American military (i.e., the government) because Nazism is—you guessed it—a sin problem.

This is the absurdity to which the “it's a sin problem” defense of guns leads us. It leads to a world of anarchy where government has no role and where no sin can be restrained by the powers that be. Indeed, it is a world without justice, the antithesis of what Christians should be aiming for. Sadly, we see this logic playing out quite clearly even in the example I gave above of sexual abuse, which is another area like guns where the problem is routinely swept under the rug as “a sin problem” when in reality most cases should be referred to the authorities. We see the devastating

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<sup>2</sup> Yes, I know it is really the “Red Sea,” but this is not the time for such discussions.

<sup>3</sup> As I have stated before, I oppose abortion and support policies I believe will reduce it while respecting the nuances and complexity of the topic. For those specifically interested in the topic, I highly recommend this [excellent article by David French](#) which addresses this topic from numerous angles, with data.

effects of this problem in many churches today, most recently in the high-profile news of sexual abuse covered up in the Southern Baptist Convention.

It is true that according to Christian teaching, violence will never be eliminated until sin is eliminated. The root cause of violence is indeed sin in the deepest corners of our hearts. Christians will always aim to address sin at its root through faith, but that does not mean we should ignore the other proximate causes of violence that can be restrained in practical ways. We cannot just close our eyes while the innocent are killed, because we are focused on the ultimate solution of curing the heart. Sometimes the heart simply will not be cured in this life, as in the case of Pharaoh. Pharaoh had an unresolved sin problem, but God still chose to physically restrain his evil in the waters of the Red Sea.

Thus we can be very clear on these two points:

1. Christians have always believed that it is the proper role of government to restrain and punish evil, and to promote good and justice. As a result, when significant evil arises, especially of a violent nature, it is absolutely right to push for government to restrain it. In fact, it is out of touch with the Christian concept of justice to do otherwise. It is not the role of government to fix the sin problem, but it is government's duty to restrain the effects of that sin.
2. The argument that gun violence is a "sin problem" that cannot be solved except in the heart leads to outrageous results when applied in the real world. All kinds of evil would be allowed to run free if this principle was truly applied, because all human evil is the result of sin. The very people who make this argument undermine it when they actively oppose abortion through government policy, support military action against those they believe to be evil (such as in World War II), or call on the police for any services whatsoever.

## The Rarity Argument

Another argument regularly made by gun advocates is that deaths by firearms are relatively rare compared to other forms of death, and that deaths from mass shootings are especially rare. As someone whose career is primarily quantitative, I know there are many ways to look at data to portray a story in different ways. When compared to total deaths in the US, including things like cardiovascular disease, cancer, etc., it is obviously the case that firearm deaths are a small portion of the total.

However, it is not the case that firearm deaths are negligible. Indeed we just learned that among children, firearm deaths were the [leading cause of death in 2020](#) in the US, ahead of car crashes for the first time in the dataset. Additionally, [79% of all murders in the US involved a gun](#).

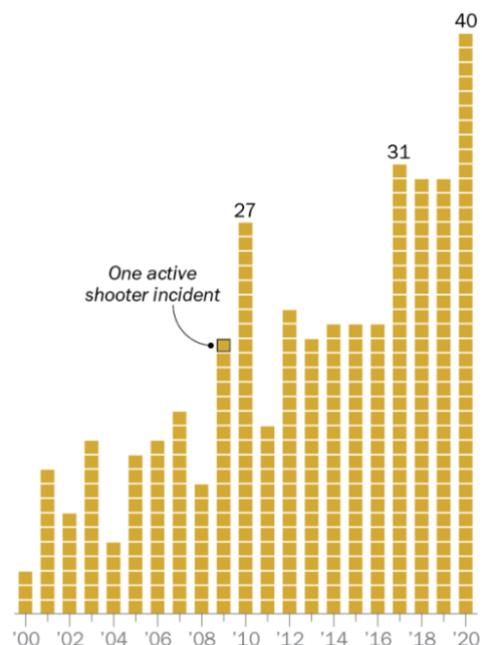
When it comes to mass shootings specifically, the death toll is indeed small relative to other firearm violence. As a recent [Pew report](#) puts it, "Regardless of the definition being used, fatalities in mass shooting incidents in the U.S. account for a small fraction of all gun murders that occur nationwide each year." The same Pew report goes on to mention, however, that active shooter incidents are increasing over time, as shown to the right.

And here we come to the main argument that is typically made. If mass shootings account for very few deaths, then we should not be making policy to restrict guns with the aim of reducing mass shootings (and the gun lobby has other arguments against restricting guns to reduce domestic violence and suicide).

But is the total number of deaths the only valid rationale for restricting guns to deal with mass shootings? The answer is no.

## Active shooter incidents have become more common in U.S. in recent years

Number of active shooter incidents, by year



Note: "Active shooter incidents" are defined by the FBI as "one or more individuals actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area."

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation.

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Indeed, rare events lead to policy action all of the time in many areas of life. How frequently something occurs, or the total number of people impacted is certainly one relevant data point for policy, but another key data point is severity or intensity. Common negative events with low or medium severity (such as fender benders with no injuries) may or may not lead to some policy response to limit the total number of events. By contrast, rare but very severe negative events almost always bring forth serious policy response, in all domains of life.

Here are just a few examples of exceedingly rare events that have led to very significant policy responses to limit the events from happening in the future:

- Use of nuclear weapons against Japan in World War II - led to host of nuclear non-proliferation treaties, protocols, etc., at enormous expense
- Terrorist attacks on 9/11 - led to all sorts of restrictions and regulations (e.g., safety protocols for travel, locking of cockpit doors, etc.), including also some questionable responses (such as certain Middle Eastern wars)
- Deepwater Horizon oil well blowout - [led to extensive new restrictions and regulation](#) on oil drilling in deep water (similar response after the Exxon Valdez oil spill)

All of these examples were extremely rare events, and using the same type of data standards as previously mentioned, would barely show up:

- Total nuclear bomb [casualties in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were about 200,000 people dead and injured](#), while somewhere [between 40 and 50 million people died in World War II](#). Making the nuclear bomb deaths 0.5% of all deaths in the war.
- The 9/11 attacks killed about 3,000 people, compared to the 2.4 million total deaths in the US in 2001, barely reaching 0.1% of all deaths that year.
- Approximately 134 million gallons of oil were spilled in the [Deepwater Horizon disaster](#), compared to more than [84 billion gallons \(2 billion barrels\) of oil produced in the US in 2010](#), around 0.2% of total production for the year.

While each of these events was rare, and the data can be used to show that rarity, the impacts were so severe that a response was not only justified but felt by most to be essential. The same thing happens when there are devastating natural disasters (see the network of early detection systems after the tsunami in Indonesia in 2004), plane crashes, epidemics, and so on.

It is also especially true that for children, any safety issues, however rare, usually lead to rapid regulatory response. For example, the deaths of children related to an inclined rocking sleeper [recently led to new regulation](#), and toys and furniture of various kinds are strictly regulated to be safe for young children. Even one serious injury or death related to a consumer product is often cause for new regulation to prevent future similar events. This kind of regulation adds up to prevent many needless deaths.

Returning to the topic of mass shootings, then, we can see that the relative rarity of such events is not a reason to maintain the status quo. The outcomes are so severe and awful, that it is unjustifiable to not act to prevent these horrible evils. Even one mass shooting of this kind should have been enough to take decisive action, and as the bodies of children and other innocents pile up, the reality of mass shootings grows increasingly damning to the American people.

Additionally, death is not the only outcome that is worth noting. Fear, too, is something we must work to stave off. Ask any parent of a school age child, and nearly everyone will confess to being afraid that their child could be next. And what of the consequences to the children themselves, who are initiated into active shooter drills from a young age, forced to cope with the terrible possibility of their own violent and completely senseless death?

For those who so like to bemoan the evaporation of childhood innocence due to the liberalization of society, and who put up such a fight about the psychological effects of wearing a mask for covid, do they not see how much this fear of violent death destroys innocence? (Not to ignore the fact that many children also face a similar reality outside of school, due to other sources of gun violence in the home and neighborhood.) We should all weep for the lost innocence of children, who cannot even count their kindergarten classroom as a refuge from violence.

To summarize the key points from this section:

- Guns are increasingly involved in the death of children in America.
- Mass shootings are relatively rare as a percentage of all deaths, but their frequency is increasing.
- The frequency of an event is not the only measure of its importance and whether it deserves a concerted response from society and government. The severity of an event is of equal importance to the frequency.
- Mass shootings are unquestionably severe events, causing significant death among the most innocent of victims, and also generating a traumatizing fear for both children and adults.
- Due to the severity of mass shootings, in addition to other forms of gun violence, action is absolutely called for.

## The Policy Argument

A final criticism that is often leveled at those calling for gun reform is that they do not have any specific policies in mind that would actually work. Such critiques usually go: “Everyone just wants to *do something*, but no one ever offers any specifics.” I saw such a social media post mere hours after the massacre at Uvalde, implying that “liberals” are just trying to score political points and don’t really care about the dead themselves.

But this is absurd, as policies to prevent gun violence, both for mass shootings and other forms of violence, have been discussed and debated endlessly. There are many current proposals that show promise for reducing unnecessary firearm deaths in all settings. Here are a few of the ideas that I think could be most useful.

- Red Flag laws, or “[Extreme Risk Protection Orders](#),” which allow a parent, teacher, friend, etc. to bring evidence to a judge that a person may harm themselves or others in the immediate future if they have access to a gun, and then allowing the judge to temporarily remove access to currently owned guns, and restrict new purchases. In many states these laws do not exist, and in those where the laws already exist, there is a need for better implementation and awareness. See more [here](#).
- [Universal background checks](#), for buyers of guns in all settings, to prevent those who should not be able to purchase a gun (such as those convicted of violent crime) from doing so in any transaction.
- [Mandatory licensing](#) and safety training for all gun owners, including regulations about the safe storage of firearms. If driving a car requires a license and passing a safety test, so certainly should owning a gun.
- [Waiting periods for gun purchase](#), to help prevent violence in the heat of the moment, and also to allow time for Red Flag laws to play their part. This is especially important for suicide prevention (as 90% of suicide attempts with a gun result in death, while only 4% of suicide attempts using other methods result in death). See also [here](#).
- [Increase the minimum age to buy a gun to 21](#) in all situations, also primarily to decrease suicide, but potentially to decrease murder as well.

None of the above policies would seriously hinder the rights of the huge majority of gun owners who wish to use guns for sport or other hobbies. Indeed, I have not even included here the restriction on owning certain types of firearms, magazines, etc. I think there is good reason to limit some types of firearms on principle, for the same reason that the average citizen cannot own a tank or an F-16. Some weapons are just too powerful and have no practical use for law abiding citizens. But I think the above policies will have much greater effect than limiting weapon types further, and are more likely to be politically feasible.

It is simply disingenuous to say that those who want to act on gun reform have not offered up specific policy proposals, and it is unfortunate that such diversionary tactics need to be addressed at all. There are many possible ideas that could reduce gun deaths, including the above and many others that are easily found with a Google search, and we must pursue them for the sake of our children especially.

## Conclusion

This article has covered a few specific objections to gun regulation that I think are particularly relevant to Christians. Here I will summarize the key points.

First, some Christians argue that government should not get involved in regulating guns further because what

drives violence is not guns, but sin, and the government cannot fix sin. However, I showed that Christian faith has from the beginning understood that it is the duty of government to restrain sin and evil. Further, if government cannot act to restrain sin, then government can do nothing at all about evil—including fighting Nazism, jailing sexual abusers, or even preventing property theft—because sin is the root cause of *all evil action*.

The same people who make this argument are also eager to use government to regulate other areas, such as abortion, showing that they do not really believe what they are saying. This goes to show that it is absolutely government's duty to respond to mass shootings, to restrain this growing evil in our land. It is not "politicizing" things to call for such action. It is reasonable and necessary. In fact, it is the only just thing to do if we really love our neighbors, and it is imminently pro-life.

Second, I address the argument that the rarity of mass shootings means we are blowing them out of proportion and should not introduce further gun regulation. After all, the majority of gun owners do not perpetrate violence. However, this argument ignores a second important criterion for policy, which is the severity or intensity of the event in question. It is common practice for government to heavily regulate activities where negative outcomes can be very severe, even if such outcomes are rare.

For example, the use of nuclear weapons, oil spills, and terrorist attacks are all very rare events by most standards, but government has strongly intervened in all three cases to prevent recurrences of the rare events that brought upon regulation in the first place, because even one rare event in these categories can be catastrophic. Even aside from the longterm scourge of domestic violence and suicide, mass shootings additionally fall into the same category of "rare but severe," both because of the death toll and because of the impact of fear on society. Thus, the reality that mass shootings are rare by absolute standards does not mean we should accept the status quo. Indeed, the severity of mass shootings cries out for action to end them.

Finally, I addressed the question of policy. Here too gun-reform advocates are often attacked for calling for action without specifics, but this is the most absurd of claims. There are many policies of promise that could potentially reduce firearm deaths (of all kinds) significantly without reducing access to guns for law-abiding citizens. These include Red Flag laws, universal background checks, mandatory waiting periods, licensing and safety requirements, a higher minimum age to purchase guns, and many other proposals easily found by a quick Google search. No policy will be perfect, but all of these show promise and could make a significant impact.

Too many children and innocents have died by guns, and the numbers are mounting. We owe it to them and to our progeny to act in the face of this great scourge. Children should not have to go to school worried that a gunman will appear and kill them in cold blood for no reason. We must act. Join with me in calling for action from Congress to implement policies like those I have described above to save lives. We all think it, and it's true: it could have been any of our kids or family members.