US Gun Violence Problem

Idea In Short

Gun violence in the United States is a complex, multi-causal problem that resists single-fix solutions. Consultants should structure the debate into people, weapon and purchase-use buckets, build trust across viewpoints, and pursue thoughtful, data-driven reforms rather than emotional shortcuts.

A Problem That Will Not Fade

Approximately 12,000 Americans are murdered each year with a firearm. The per capita homicide rate is roughly four times that of England and six times that of Germany. In the days after the Sandy Hook tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, there were 242 reported firearm homicides in the United States. All Americans can probably agree that too many people are dying.

The sadness compounds because the pattern repeats. Shootings in Las Vegas and at a Texas church followed, all senseless and cowardly. The same gun violence that horrified the nation years ago persists today. The problem is not fading on its own, which means it demands the structured thinking consultants bring to any intractable challenge. 1

It Is a Complex Problem

Gun violence in the US has many root causes. Americans get excited when they discuss guns, gun control and violence. Unfortunately, the discussion is often scattered. People are too quick to place blame and too quick to offer solutions. The conversation resembles word soup, with good ideas circulated but unstructured and inadequately thought through. As a result, a lot of good ideas are actually ignored.

Unstructured conversation is just brainstorming. When the conversation is this unstructured, it is difficult to make heads or tails. Some ideas seem good, but upon reflection you are not

sure. The same type of confusion happens in companies all the time.

Trust matters when discussing anything charged with emotions and opinions. Everyone needs to come from a place of trust. Trust that the other person is open-minded. Trust that all participants are Americans looking for a good answer. Trust that the discussion will leave everyone smarter. Trust is sorely lacking in the US, and bringing it back is the first step.

Break the Problem Down

Consultants like to bucket problems into root causes or at least categories. While there are probably dozens of institutional factors, at a high level there appear to be three major ones that deserve consideration.

The first bucket is people, which asks how responsible the people who buy or obtain guns are. The second bucket is weapon, which asks how dangerous the weapons available to the public are. The third bucket is use, which asks what constitutes legal use and how to prevent illegal use. Structuring the problem this way transforms a shouting match into a tractable analysis.

The People Bucket

Every responsible person should have the privilege of owning a rifle to hunt or skeet shoot, or a handgun to protect themselves. The challenge is that not everyone is as responsible, trained, mature or thoughtful as you. As George Carlin put it, think of how stupid the average person is, then realize half of them are even stupider.

Do we believe people are rational all the time? No way. People drive under the influence, enter shotgun weddings and divorce on impulse. They act on biases, bad information and impulses constantly. If people were rational, the US would not have an obesity problem. People are beautiful and messy. Anyone who doubts how reckless and uninformed people can be with guns should search for the biggest gun fail videos online. It is completely scary.

The Weapon Bucket

There is a lot of talk about the types of guns, bullets and magazines available to the public. The core question comes down to what is civilian-use and what is military-use. The public

has to decide that line.

The challenge here is avoiding false equivalency and false choice. An argument for limiting the sale of automatic weapons is not the same as saying the government will confiscate all guns. The debate needs more thoughtful and respectful dialogue and less vitriol. Conflating reasonable regulation with outright bans prevents progress.

The Purchase and Use Bucket

The public needs to decide what is legal and what is not. There is a law that says people should have a background check prior to buying a gun. That makes common sense, but about 40 percent of guns are not purchased through licensed gun dealers. A gun show loophole allows the sale of guns between private parties without a background check in most states. 2

To many, this is the biggest problem. Owning a gun is a privilege and a powerful responsibility. It is in everyone's self-interest to keep guns away from those who do not deserve to have them. Closing the private-sale gap is the kind of targeted, high-impact reform that structured analysis reveals.

Japan offers a revealing contrast. To own a gun there, a person must attend a one-day training seminar and pass a written test with 95 percent or better. They must complete a shooting test, a mental health exam and a drug test. They renew their license every three years, can buy guns only from three places in each prefecture and must lock guns and ammunition in separate places. They can buy new ammunition only by bringing back the old shells. Japan typically records fewer than 10 gun deaths a year in a population of 126 million. 3

America Is Different

The British decided to essentially ban private ownership of handguns after a mass shooting in 1987. Australia banned guns in 1996. That will not happen in the US. There are 300 million firearms currently in the United States and demand continues to grow. The US is 4.4 percent of the world's population but holds 42 percent of the world's guns.

A similar attack on school children happened in China on the exact same day as Sandy

Hook. A mentally ill man stormed into a school and attacked children with a knife. Many children were hurt, some critically, but none died. The children of Sandy Hook were not so lucky. The weapon matters, and the data bears that out.

Studies show that crime itself is not the differentiator. You are just as likely to be robbed in New York as in London. The problem is that the crime is far more violent in the US. The odds of being robbed are about the same, but the odds of dying during that robbery in New York are dozens of times higher than in London. Research shows a correlation between the number of guns and murders. It is correlation, not causation, but it makes intuitive sense because humans are emotional. Words turn into punches, and punches turn into knives and guns.

A Coalition Seeking Solutions

A coalition of US mayors has asked the president and Congress to come up with a plan. Michael Bloomberg was among the most vocal proponents, and he struck many as a no-nonsense leader. The division on the topic is visible in the up and down votes on promotional videos about the cause.

The Harvard Business Review explored creating a $100 billion gun safety industry, framing the challenge as an opportunity for innovation rather than a purely regulatory fight. That kind of reframing is exactly what good consultants do. The path forward requires honest data, respectful dialogue and the willingness to bucket the problem rather than shout past it. America has a problem, and pretending otherwise has not made it go away.

- 1Pew Research On What The Data Says About Gun Deaths In The US
- 2Wikipedia Overview Of The Gun Show Loophole
- 3BBC News On How Japan Has Almost Eradicated Gun Crime

Summary

America's gun violence problem is real, complex and uniquely American. No single fix exists, but structured problem-solving across people, weapons and purchase-use can find common ground. Trust, data and respectful dialogue matter more than blame and vitriol.