

# Statistician Rethinks Gun Control After Digging into the Data

Statistician Leah Libresco said she used to be for gun control. Then she looked at the data.

Writing at the *Washington Post*, the former newswriter for the data journalism site FiveThirtyEight [explained](#) her epiphany.

*“Before I started researching gun deaths, gun-control policy used to frustrate me. I wished the National Rifle Association would stop blocking common-sense gun-control reforms such as banning assault weapons, restricting silencers, shrinking magazine sizes and all the other measures that could make guns less deadly.*

*Then, my colleagues and I at FiveThirtyEight spent three months analyzing all 33,000 lives ended by guns each year in the United States, and I wound up frustrated in a whole new way. We looked at what interventions might have saved those people, and the case for the policies I’d lobbied for crumbled when I examined the evidence.”*

Libresco pointed out, as [we have](#) at Intellectual Takeout, that media have drawn misguided conclusions about the effectiveness of gun control in nations such as Australia and the United Kingdom. She “concluded that they didn’t prove much about what America’s policy should be.”

From silencers, to bans on “assault weapons,” to magazine capacity limits, all of the policy prescriptions she had heard politicians talk about for years would be basically meaningless, Libresco concluded upon digging into the numbers.

The truth is suicide counts for the vast majority of gun

deaths in the U.S ([two-thirds](#)). The next largest death figures come from homicides involving young men (15-34), deaths that often involve gang conflicts in which shooters use firearms obtained unlawfully. Gun legislation, she concluded, would have a minimal impact on gun deaths in the U.S. But that doesn't mean we should do nothing.

“A reduction in gun deaths is most likely to come from finding smaller chances for victories and expanding those solutions as much as possible,” Libresco writes. “We save lives by focusing on a range of tactics to protect the different kinds of potential victims and reforming potential killers, not from sweeping bans focused on the guns themselves.”

Libresco's story was a true “mugging by reality,” and one cannot help be impressed that the social scientist did something that seems increasingly rare in modern society: she changed her mind. As Jacob [Sullum wryly noted](#) at Reason, “If only politicians were so open to contradiction by reality.”

The problem is that gun control has become a moral issue in American culture as much as a political one.

Mere facts have difficulty standing up to moral outrage of this kind. But facts, as they say, are stubborn things.

—