Gun Carnage Is a Public Health Crisis

**By**[**THE EDITORIAL BOARD**](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/opinion/editorialboard.html)OCT. 13, 2017

“We’ll be talking about gun laws as time goes by,” President Trump promised all too casually after the Las Vegas gunman took 58 lives in a rapid-fire slaughter. Time is indeed going by, and the silence is alarming as the Republican Congress and Mr. Trump, the devoted candidate of the National Rifle Association, duck their responsibility to confront the public health crisis of gun deaths.

There were so many hundreds of casualties in Las Vegas that many were treated by local Air Force surgeons who found themselves serving as specialists in triage — in a civilian fire zone. “These were definitely injuries you would see in a war zone,” one of the doctors [told The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/10/05/something-we-would-see-in-a-war-zone-military-surgeons-on-the-wounds-they-treated-in-las-vegas/?utm_term=.12362916344b). Victims bled from single wounds through the chest and abdomen because the gunman shot from a high perch with military-style weapons adapted to shoot rapidly downward into the concert audience that was his chosen target.

This is the domestic war zone now bedeviling the nation as Washington looks the other way. Republican leaders are once again contriving to divert public attention to the challenges of mental illness, whereas the core issue is and has been the egregious availability of military-style weapons that the gun industry and the N.R.A. are lethally marketing to civilians. The talk of outlawing the “bump stock” device that heightened the Vegas gunman’s rapid fire is similarly diversionary, since the problem is the weapon, not the latest accessory.

Washington has also hobbled basic research into what is clearly a public health disaster. In 1996, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was barred from spending any funds “to advocate or promote gun control.” Full and accurate federal information has been choked off repeatedly since then. Research ordered by President Barack Obama following the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre of 20 children in 2012 was never carried out. California, by contrast, has chosen a more enlightened path. Reacting to the 2015 gun killings in San Bernardino, the state in July created the [Firearm Violence Research Center](https://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/publish/news/newsroom/12176) at the University at California at Davis to get beyond the hobbles the gun lobby and Congress have put on federal researchers.

If there is any bright spot it is that little more than a third of American households own a gun now, compared with 50 percent in earlier decades. Still, this has driven the industry to try to sell more guns to fewer Americans, from battlefield-type weapons to the concealed-carry pistols marketed as stylish vigilante accessories. According to a 2015 study by Harvard and Northeastern Universities, 3 percent of American adults own half the nation’s guns — averaging a startling 17 guns apiece.

The Las Vegas shooter was one of these hard-core arsenal owners. He stockpiled dozens of weapons, apparently with no one, and no law, to question the practice or his rationale. The government should be asking how he was able to do this, and how it could have been prevented. To the nation’s continuing sorrow, however, it’s clear little can be expected of the president and congressional leaders as time goes by and the next mass shooting draws nearer.