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## Moral of the Story

The Ethicist's take on the news

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### Give Women Guns

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Brooks Kraft/Corbis

#### The Issue

Congress overwhelmingly passed, and on May 22 President Obama signed, [a credit card reform bill](#) that includes a provision allowing visitors to national parks to carry concealed guns. (The guns need not be purchased with credit cards.) Can ethics supply a response to gun violence while sidestepping the usual — and unproductive — head-butting between those for and against gun-control laws?

#### The Argument

Ethics has two broad concerns — determining what's right, and getting people to do what's right. When it comes to the former, there is clearly an ethical issue: guns are a significant social problem, the [second leading cause of injury-related death](#) in the U.S. [behind car accidents](#). In 1997, for example, [guns caused 64,207 injuries and 32,436 deaths](#). There were 544,880 crimes using guns [reported to the police](#) in 1994. Expanding the real estate where guns can be carried is unlikely to improve these grim statistics. (Perhaps that's why visitors may not tote guns to the White House or the Capitol Building, despite the enthusiasm of Congress and the president for the new bill.)

The second concern — how to address this problem — is perpetually contentious. One camp seeks safety though laws meant to circumscribe the threat of guns in American life. (This side is not doing well. There are [more than 200 million privately owned guns](#) in the U.S.) The other side regards gun ownership as a fundamental constitutional right and a deterrent to crime. Loggerheads.

Happily, President Obama has shown us a way to get around such deadlocks. In his recent [commencement address at Notre Dame](#) on a similarly polarized issue, reproductive rights, he acknowledged that “the views of the two camps are irreconcilable” and urged a courteous search for common ground — in that case, a call for “reducing unintended pregnancies.”

Inspired by his example, I propose curbing gun violence not by further restricting the availability of guns but by expanding and reorienting it. Men would still be forbidden to walk the streets armed, in accordance with current laws, but women would be required to carry pistols in plain sight whenever they are out and about.

Were I to board the subway late at night, around Lincoln Center perhaps, and find it filled with women openly carrying Metropolitan Opera programs and Glock automatics, I'd feel snug and secure. A train packed with armed men would not produce the same comforting sensation. Maybe that's because men have a disconcerting tendency to shoot people, while women display admirable restraint. [Department of Justice figures](#) show that between 1976 and 2005, 91.3 percent of gun homicides were committed by men, 8.7 percent by women.

Many pro-gun advocates assert that armed and honest citizens deter crime. My plan would expand the ranks of those worthies. And those who are anti-gun can embrace the plan as a noble experiment in gender equality. Gun violence — most violence — is primarily something perpetrated by men, mostly upon other men, but it is also true that men shoot women far more often than the other way around. The mutual

appeal to red and blue states would ensure ratification of any necessary constitutional amendment, should The Armament Equality Act (Guns for Gals) be challenged as unconstitutional gender bias.

Given women's splendid record of seldom shooting at, for example, me, they've earned a provisional chance to serve the public good in this way. Even if some women prove imprudent with firearms — that is, act like men — feminizing gun ownership could ultimately reduce its appeal to men, making gun-toting as unmasculine as carrying a purse. There are occupations whose status (and pay) declined once they were taken up by women: secretaries, telephone operators, teachers. We already endure the mischief of such sexism; why not harness it for good? And while some argue that keeping a gun for protection actually [makes you statistically less safe](#), is that true if you factor in gender? I'm skeptical. But let's find out empirically. Surely ethics compels a respect for truth, for mustering actual facts.

There is the risk that some women's guns will fall into the wrong hands: a pistol might be wrested away by a husband or boyfriend. Fortunately, [“smart gun” technology](#) is being developed that can recognize a gun's authorized user by fingerprint or grip, or that takes [other approaches altogether](#). A thief would be unable to fire such a gun. If fingerprints, why not a testosterone-detecting trigger-lock, a pistol no man can fire? That's American ingenuity — oddly applied, perhaps, but no less ingenious for that.

If nothing else, my plan would compel both factions, pro- and anti-gun, to reconsider their positions. If its adoption strews the streets with bullet-riddled bodies, then the pro-gun forces will have to abandon the idea that increased gun ownership decreases crime. If my plan actually does reduce gun violence, then gun-control partisans (including me) will have to reexamine their own assumptions. Regardless of the outcome, my plan will bring light and learning — actual evidence — to a debate largely characterized by squabbling and bluster. The only one who should fear it is some squirrel in Yosemite with criminal intent. But thanks to the credit card reform act, that varmint is already a walking ghost.

**Update** [A Follow-Up on Guns for Gals](#)