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Australia's Deadliest Animals Are No Match for America's Guns

Aussies embrace risk for their kids in a way that would make a lot of American parents cringe.

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By **Betsey Stevenson**

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Australia's snakes, crocodiles, octopi, spiders and sharks: None is as dangerous as a gun. *Photo montage by Christine Vanden Byllaardt. Photographer: Ian Waldie/Getty Images*

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Australia has more creatures that can kill you than just about any other country: salt-water crocodiles with record-breaking bite-strength, the world's most venomous snakes and spiders, and of course sharks. A woman was attacked by a shark just last month in Sydney Harbour while taking an evening dip in the ocean.

Fortunately, she is expected to recover; a veterinarian on the shore was able to apply a tourniquet. The attack inside the harbor – generally seen as safer than the ocean – was the first in 15 years. Even the coastal waters around Sydney, where millions of people swim each year, are quite safe, with only one death from a shark in the last 60 years.

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how to swim, including in strong rip tides, but they are also taught to identify and avoid deadly sea creatures such as the tiny blue-ringed octopus.

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Australians embrace risk for their kids in a way that would make a lot of American parents cringe. Every time I leave the US to spend time with my in-laws in Australia, I am struck by the difference between the Australian and American ways of managing risk. I've spent the past few weeks thinking about this issue, and this week's mass shooting in Kansas City spurred me to write about it.

Australians haven't completely embraced risk. They have learned that while some risks must be accepted, others should be reduced, even when it requires personal sacrifice. And they have decided they don't have to live with the risk of mass shootings.

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In other words: Australians are no less concerned with the need to defend themselves than Americans are. In fact, many of the arguments that Americans use to support access to guns could apply in Australia.

Australians have sensible gun-safety legislation not because there were no costs to such legislation, but because they understand the benefits. Many Americans seem resigned to the risk of gun violence. Fear has such a strong grip on American culture that for a long time the federal government wouldn't even allow research into gun violence.

But the fear is not of gun violence. It is fear of addressing a problem that has come to define American culture. If the US tried to tackle the problem of mass violence, it would require asking profound questions about what changes we are willing to make to our way of life. Should Americans have the right to order firearms off the internet? Or to arm themselves and engage in a violent protest against the outcome of an election? Are these changes we won't consider no matter the costs?

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do so little about it?

To save ourselves from this violence, Americans must refuse to become inured by gun deaths. We can learn from how Australians have tackled gun violence – and from their approach to risk overall. Risk is not something to be afraid of. It must be faced head-on, because only then can we make sensible, informed choices about how to mitigate it.

Research shows that regulating guns will reduce deaths, just as regulating cars and driving does. It might involve some personal sacrifice. It will require some difficult choices. But to do nothing is to accept a country in which kids die regularly from guns.

In Australia, kids don't die from guns. Nor do they die from the most venomous spider in the world, even if they find one in their shoe: People know to check their shoes and, if they find one, take it to an anti-venom collection site. Sensible and community-minded behavior is why no one in Australia has died from a funnel-web spider in nearly a quarter century.

It's possible to reduce risks to keep kids safer. But it requires making purposeful, community-minded change. That's the fear America has to overcome.

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