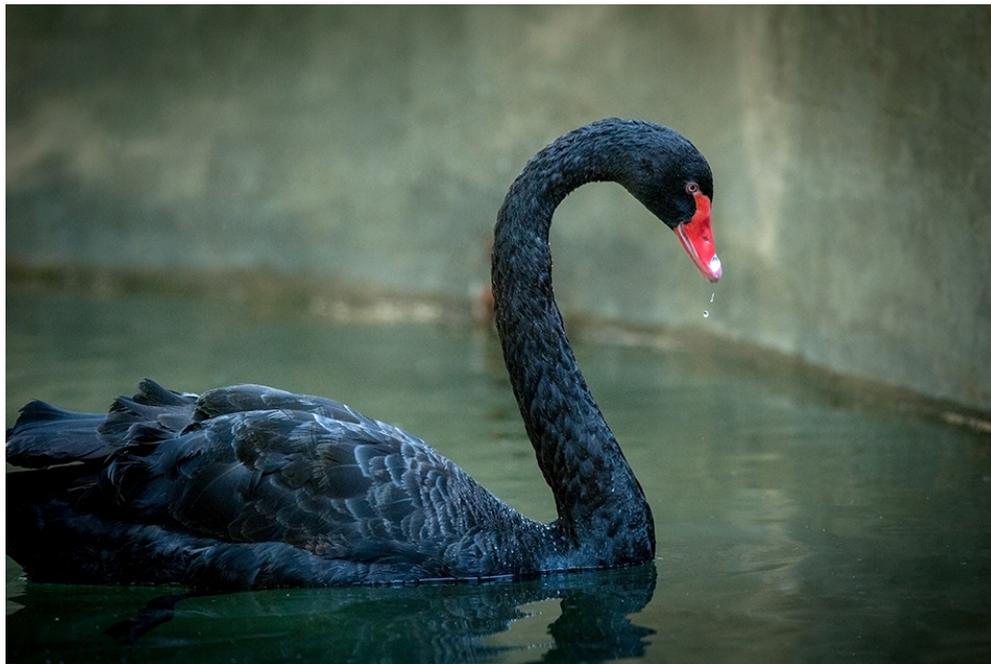


# [The Black Swan, Turkey, and Butcher](#)

written by Kathleen M. Pike, PhD

May 18, 2018

*This week's Five on Friday was slated to focus on something else altogether. But as I sit down to prepare today's blog, Santa Fe High School is still an active crime scene, emergency medical care is underway in the hopes of saving lives, and ten students are already reported dead. It was [only a few months ago](#) that 17 individuals, mostly students, were killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida.*



[Photo Credit](#)

*The next few days will be filled with news coverage and finger pointing and lots of opinions. What we will not have are a lot of data. We have a void the size of the Grand Canyon when it comes to research that could meaningfully inform the conversation on gun violence in America. Why? And what do black swans, turkeys, and butchers have to do with the heinous mass shooting in Santa Fe?*

**1. The 1996 Dickey Amendment.** A rider in the federal government omnibus spending bill, the [Dickey Amendment](#) effectively halted all research on gun violence. With strong lobbying by the National Rifle Association, the Dickey Amendment prohibits government funds designated for injury prevention and control to be used to advocate or promote gun control. That shouldn't have put a freeze on all research on gun violence, but the same budget also reallocated the funds for firearms research to the study of traumatic brain injury. No money. No research.

**2. Decades later.** In 2012, Dickey, himself, wrote an [editorial advocating for a public health approach to gun violence](#). Dickey argued for research to unpack the wickedly troubling and recalcitrant problem of gun violence in America. Such research would include thoughtful and sophisticated examination of the mental health questions that always come up at these times of crisis. But nothing really changed, and the Centers for Disease Control continued to stay away from funding any research on the subject.

**3. March 23, 2018.** Although the Dickey Amendment never explicitly prohibited firearms research, it did prohibit advocacy of gun control, and it eliminated all research funding. The *de facto* reality is that this research field lay dormant for decades. The vacuum has been filled with fiercely held opinions and beliefs that

are supported by little or no data. Two months ago, negotiations around this year's Omnibus 1.3 trillion-dollar budget attempted to change this situation. The result is a report clarifying that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention can, in fact, conduct research on gun violence. It [was signed into law](#) on March 23, 2018.

**4. Mental illness and gun violence.** We can expect the finger pointing to begin immediately after a mass shooting. Some will blame feeble gun laws. Others will blame failing mental health systems. This debate is stale and unproductive. There is no doubt that something is seriously wrong with someone who opens fire with the intent to kill innocent people. But don't be fooled. The vast majority of individuals with mental illness are not violent. They are, in fact, more likely to being victims rather than perpetrators of violence. Using that same line of reasoning, the vast majority of individuals who own guns are also not likely to open fire in a school yard and are not likely to kill anyone over the lifetime of owning a gun. So, what's up?

**5. Black Swan Events.** These mass shootings are heinous, dramatic events. They also happen to be statistically infrequent - even though it doesn't seem that way at the moment. [Nassim Taleb](#) calls these kinds of occurrences [black swan events](#). These rare events have outsized impact and are extremely difficult to prospectively predict. They assault our values and implicit beliefs in a safe, predictable world. Investing in a research agenda that examines risk and vulnerability related to gun violence in America is essential and urgent. It is the only way to create new knowledge. The current interpretation of the Dickey Amendment is clear. Now Congress needs to appropriate funds for firearms research to the Centers for Disease Control to make it real.

*As Taleb says, [what may be unpredictable for the turkey is not unpredictable for the butcher](#). Clearly, it's time for us to stop being the turkey when it comes to gun violence.*