



“America’s Gun Obsession: A Public Safety Crisis”

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The Undergraduate Research Writing Conference

• 2020 •

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey



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THE STATE UNIVERSITY
OF NEW JERSEY

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Introduction

The inability to come to a consensus concerning laws that might reduce the incidence of mass shootings has plagued American society for decades. The loss of human life at the hands of a slow and frustrating political process involving “opposing viewpoints, the effects of special interest groups, [and] the second amendment... create[ing] intense partisanship” has generated an impassable stalemate that would require a fundamental alteration of political thinking or an unlikely compromise in order to achieve progress (Jashinsky et al, 2017, p. 3).

Due to the highly polarized nature of today’s political climate, as reinforced by lobbyists and news media, there has been a diversion of focus from treating this issue as a public safety concern towards assigning blame to the engrained cultural differences among U.S. citizens. This appears to be a uniquely American problem as other countries, like Australia, have managed to put opposing viewpoints aside and enact legislation to effectively curtail the incidence of mass shootings in their country. This begs the question: why has the United States’ continually failed to enact gun reform after crisis whereas other countries with similar experiences have?

This paper will examine how America’s “well-established gun culture” has thwarted the efforts of compromise and productive political discourse by focusing on the origin of America’s gun obsession and its priority over public safety (Peters, R, 2013, p. 195). To address the success of other countries where America has failed, this paper will draw upon the Australian approach to solving their gun crisis after experiencing a mass shooting like those of the United States. To determine whether Australian policies are feasible in the context of the United States, the current and future status of gun regulation in America will be taken into consideration through examining public opinion and the implications of the 2nd amendment. Finally, a public health

approach will be explored to bring both parties together under a common umbrella by identifying the issue as a public safety concern in need of regulation.

Although several factors including law and media framing have helped drive the epidemic of mass shootings in the U.S., at its core the lack of action for gun reform has a cultural root that emerged during the American revolution in which weapons were representative of self-reliance and freedom that makes addressing mass shootings in American law and policy a hard sell. Thus, this paper argues that the most effective method to resolve the occurrence of mass shootings is to remove the sentimental attachment some have to guns by reframing the necessity for gun regulation as a public health issue similar to the restrictions placed upon the individual use of motor vehicles.

Key Terms

To fully dissect the nature of the question at hand, it is necessary to define certain terms prior to delving into the deep history and political process involving guns in America and Australia. The key to understanding the cultural ties a nation has with guns is by identifying its historical roots. Therefore, recognizing a nation as a frontier country would imply the nation's historical past included an era of expansion into unsettled lands typically entailing the possibility of encountering adversaries when exploring uncharted territory, an emphasis on agricultural development to sustain oneself, and an increased desire to seek individual development (Yamane, 2017). References to historian Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Theory" will be employed to characterize the frontiersman spirit as a uniquely American trait with a focus on democracy, individualism, self-reliance and freedom. Expanding westward from the Atlantic Coast in which the original colonies were developed, a new identity separate from that of its

mother land, Britain, was established as the America nationality that continues to influence western culture today (Turner, F. J, 1893).

To address the gun crisis under question, the need for a coalition is necessary. A coalition is a mutually beneficial collaboration between groups of people in pursuit of a common goal. Although each member may have a different motive for their participation, the group is unified in their desire to achieve action that would otherwise be impossible to accomplish without a plurality. In the context of this paper, a specific coalition for gun control will be mentioned, the Australian National Coalition for Gun Control (NCGC). This alliance took action in response to Australia's most notorious mass shootings in order to prevent future incidences of gun violence in all forms and advocate for gun control throughout all of Australia's states (Peters, R, 2013). This coalition included several activist groups, unions, and nonprofit organizations putting their combined efforts towards the fight for uniform gun legislation in Australia.

As a means of analyzing the success of Australian policy, the theoretical framework of rational firearm regulation will be utilized as the lens to interpret the most feasible policy solution to a nation's gun problem. The concept of rational firearm regulation was the key strategy employed in swiftly enacting gun law throughout Australia. This theory is based on reason and logic in which the government creates legislation that is within the bounds of reach of a nation's preexisting law and political process. Creating attainable universal reform requires a strong coalition of diverse factions to work together with experts to compose evidence-based solutions ready for implementation. To create law that could be followed through and enforced universally by each jurisdiction, science-based solutions to prevent gun violence must be achieved by seeking comprehensive regulations that follow the recommendations of public health, legal, and criminology research conducted within the country (Peters, R, 2013). This

would allow the nation to directly address issues impacting citizens and ensure the safety of the public without stripping citizens of their possessions completely.

Exploring an alternative solution to America's gun crisis evokes the theoretical framework of a public health approach in which a multidisciplinary methodology is applied to initiate comprehensive action against public safety concerns. The public health approach involves "defin[ing] the problem, identif[ing] risk and protective factors, develop[ing] and test[ing] prevention strategies, and ensur[ing] widespread adoption of effective programs" (Hemenway & Miller, 2013, p. 2). By examining an issue under the interpretation of public health, a focus on the safety and well-being of whole societies is prioritized. A unique aspect of the field is that it strives to provide the maximum benefit for the largest number of people (Hemenway & Miller, 2013). Public health draws upon a plurality of fields to evaluate and respond preventable health risks including medicine, sociology, psychology, criminology, education, and economics. This approach would provide quantifiable data rather than public opinion to allow for direct regulation and restriction to preserve the health and safety of the public.

Cultural Root

Pinpointing the historical cause of America's gun culture will create a foundation for understanding the emotionally charged reaction some Americans have towards gun reform. This makes any efforts toward productive political discourse regarding this issue impossible. Dissecting the cultural root of the transcendence of the physical object into a symbolic figure in which individuals can personally identify with can be revealed through analysis of the development of early American values. The prioritization of unrestricted gun ownership over the

safety and security of the public stems back to America's established values of freedom, individual empowerment, and self-reliance.

Early American history identifies the United States as a frontier country in which there was a necessity for guns to protect oneself and achieve individual success. However, this necessity has transformed into a culturally driven obsession in current times. Gun culture flourished during the era of westward expansion in which they were utilized as a tool for agricultural purposes and as a means of defense; however "guns were not as plentiful or as loaded with symbolism as they would come to be" today (Yamane, 2017, p. 6). While guns "were not as plentiful" during the late 1800s, they were still directly associated with and therefore subconsciously linked to the culturally defining period of frontier exploration. The emergence of the opposition to any limitation towards gun ownership arguably dates back to the development of the frontier spirit being that "frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy" (Turner, F. J, 1893, p. 46). The values of individualism in America during this time evoke a sense of pride and patriotism resulting in the ability of gun ownership to be viewed as an overarching "symbol" of America's development into an independent nation that prioritized the rights of the people over all else. These values established as theorized by Turner have persisted throughout generations and coincides with current sentiment regarding guns in America, solidifying a gun culture that is tied to the early American principles of individual rights and prosperity.

The cultural value placed upon guns in western states specifically cultivates a vast community of people that participate in its recreational uses and establish traditions to be passed down by generation making the response to any form of gun restriction in these communities a direct threat to their lifestyle. America's historically deep relationship with guns and its

subsequent gun culture makes gun reform activists' attempts at discussing the possibility of enacting national gun regulation one-sided. In some parts of the country, guns are a "part of socialization" in which owners may be members of gun clubs as well as partake in recreational activities such as hunting and target shooting. Subsequently, children in these areas are exposed to activities and traditions relating to guns at a young age and are even involved themselves as "receiving a 'real' rifle is seen as a rite of passage from boyhood into manhood" (Yamane, 2017, p. 7). Drawing upon frontier theory, this "rite of passage" could be seen as the character defining transition from "boyhood" to becoming an independent, self-reliant man ready to explore the uncharted territory of "adulthood". America's attachment to guns is generational and has been kept alive for hundreds of years, therefore, the possibility of the government enacting law that would forcibly strip them of a significant part of their culture is met with a highly reactionary response.

The integration of gun recreation into the lifestyle of a large portion of Americans has ultimately led to the formation of a structural foundation readily available for the opposition to gun reform to organize. The U.S. continues to experience a pervasive gun culture with a sizeable population of gunowners throughout all 50 states and a "best estimate [of] somewhere over 300 million and growing" guns in circulation (Vizzard, W. J. 2015, p. 900). Gun possession has continued to grow in tandem with recreational events and associations including gun stores, gun shows, shooting ranges, and other shooting activities. America's highly prevalent gun culture establishes a vast coalition of people in support of gun rights and a systemic upper hand over their opponents as "the gun rights advocacy infrastructure far exceeds the meager gun control advocacy infrastructure" (Vizzard, W. J. 2015, p. 888). These organizations imbedded in the recreational use of guns strengthens pro-gun support by laying the groundwork for a stable

“infrastructure” to further develop advocacy organizations. A structural advantage is manifested through these networks in which individuals can organize against strict gun legislation, while gun reform activists are lacking this kind of unification.

Australia's Approach

In the face of an immovable stalemate, it is valuable to look to other developed nations with similar historical backgrounds and political systems for guidance in how they solved such a pressing issue. In this instance, analysis of the Australian approach to passing gun law and creating compromise in a divided nation will be useful in furthering the gun discussion in America. The United States' continued inability to respond swiftly and appropriately to mass shootings can be addressed by evaluating the Australian methods to solving their gun crisis after experiencing a mass shooting like those of the United States.

Australia retains similar traditions of gun ownership and is of a similar political configuration to the United States making it a useful site for a comparative study of gun legislation in response to mass shootings. Australian gun culture is parallel to that of American society as both countries were former frontier countries. The necessity for guns in Australia was present in the daily lives of citizens, revealing a connection between the two nations regarding gun policy and resistance to regulation. Australia not only exhibits a cultural connection to guns that makes reform a highly controversial subject, but shares similarities in the geographical complications of enacting effective gun law that America experiences. Australia is divided into states in which each territory has its own rules and regulations regarding political issues, therefore, allowing for inconsistencies in gun law across the nation (Peters, R, 2013). Similar to gun policy throughout America, opposing laws between Australia's states resulted in no measurable improvements in gun safety as they were ineffective across geographical boundaries.

However, unlike mass shootings in America, the singular occurrence of a mass shooting in Australia immediately mobilized its national, state, and territorial governments to prevent any future incidents of tragedy from taking place again (Ulrich, M. R, 2019). With so many parallels to the U.S. it is unclear why Australia was able to successfully respond to crisis with national reform, whereas America has failed to implement substantial gun law at any level.

Australia's main effort in tackling their gun crisis was rooted in mobilizing its National Coalition for Gun Control consisting of hundreds of community and professional organizations to put public pressure on government officials to enact reform directly after the tragedy. In 1996, Australia experienced what was the most catastrophic mass shooting at the time, resulting in the death of 35 people in Tasmania, Australia (Ulrich, M. R, 2019). This prompted a national demand for the restriction of gun accessibility, but as expected it was met with extreme views on both sides and legal barriers to enacting federal regulation. However, Australia was able to effectively enact substantial gun regulation within 12 days of the incident in which all states approved a National Firearms Agreement that most notably "banned semiautomatic rifles and shotguns [and] implemented a buy back of the banned weapons" (Ulrich, M. R, 2019 p. 7). This timely response was brought about by the work of the NCGC that had also previously advocated for several weapons acts that would establish permit and registration systems.

The success of Australia's response to mass shootings can be attributed to the overwhelming public pressure the NCGC was able to generate through the sheer size and breadth of the coalition. The coalition for gun control consisted of a diverse collection of groups interested in their own particular issue related to gun violence. Despite their differences, their common goal remained strongly engrained in their desire to limit the availability of lethal weapons. The diversity in organizations participating under this common goal "reflected the

multiplicity of dangers that guns pose in society: some NCGC members were especially concerned about domestic violence, others about crime on the streets, youth suicide, or workplace violence” (Peters, R, 2013, p. 196). Having a coalition that encompasses all parties concerned about the general gun control policy is most effective in enacting reform, rather than having separate factions. Groups that focus on certain aspects of gun violence such as gang violence, suicide, domestic violence, or mass shootings may end up working against each other by competing over which facet of gun violence should take priority and what solutions would be best for their specific problem.

To convince those in opposition, the NCGC successfully reframed the issue from that of individual ownership to a one of public safety. The overwhelming resistance to stricter gun laws asserted by Australia’s gun lobby and the dynamics of their two party system was ultimately overcome when the Australian public was able to unify under the sentiment that “guns are inherently dangerous products whose availability should be strictly regulated... however useful or enjoyable guns may be for their owners, the interests of public health and public safety must prevail” (Peters, R 2013, p. 197). Their general consensus was that guns are inherently dangerous and regardless of their enjoyable use by gun owners, public health and safety took precedence. Australian society was able to unify behind the idea that mass shootings were ultimately an issue of public health and safety. Through this framework, comprehensive gun reform based on the research and recommendation of health and criminology experts was victorious over push back from avid supporters of gun culture. They were able to regulate the accessibility of weaponry to prevent the abuse of firearms.

Applicability to the U.S.

To determine whether Australian policies are feasible in the context of the United States, the current and potential future of gun regulation in America will be taken into consideration. At first glance copying and pasting the Australian approach within the United States may appear to be a viable option to solving the nation's gun crisis. However, taking inspiration from Australia and applying their policies in the United States is not a simple task upon further examination of public opinion and the implications of the 2nd amendment. Even small differences in political wording and cultural meaning can make Australian policy hard to achieve in the U.S.

It is arguable that American gun culture is the main reason for the nation's extreme case of gun violence, mass shootings, and lax gun policy as the result of the physical symbol of guns becoming a source of identity for its citizens. This sentiment may indicate why a policy change is abhorrent to gun owners because it "has come to represent an attack on [individuals'] masculinity, independence, and moral identity" (Mencken & Froese, 2017, p. 6). Possessing a gun translates to empowerment for many gun owners as they correlate guns to self-reliance especially when it comes to righting injustice. Those emotionally empowered by guns are the key subjects who believe that guns are necessary for community protection as "these owners tend to view guns as a cure for gun violence rather than a cause" (Mencken & Froese, 2017, p. 55). Therefore, understanding the established relationship between gun enthusiasts and the physicality of guns is key to understanding the opposition to gun regulation.

While Australia and the U.S. have similar backgrounds in gun culture, they do not share the moral and emotional tie to gun ownership forged by their own struggles for autonomy. The United States' exhibits an added paradigm to gun possession dominated by the violent nature of their struggle for independence from Britain. Although Australia was a possession of the British

empire, their independence was the result of legislative action as opposed to violent conflict (Gare, D, 1999). Therefore, the two nations don't share a fundamental experience in the formation of their country in which the U.S. placed an importance and an emotional attachment to the possession of weapons, whereas Australia's gun culture stops at recreational use (Peters, R, 2013). The framers of the constitution considered "America's traditional bedrock values of self-reliance, self-defense, and self-determination" and solidified these values by galvanizing it in America's foundational document as the Second Amendment right to bear arms (Mencken & Froese, 2017, p. 18).

A major roadblock to national policy for the restriction or mandatory buyback of weapons is undoubtedly tempered by the controversy surrounding America's Second Amendment. The Revolutionary War created a cultural attachment to guns in the U.S. which was not present in Australian history. This lack of similar experiences made it possible for Australia to compromise and enact legislation to restrict gun availability. The fundamental right solidified by America's constitution imposes limitations on the extent to which the federal government can restrict the availability of firearms to the public, whereas Australia has no such permanent record (Mcnamara, 2017). Although not impossible, repealing an amendment from the constitution is an extremely rigorous process and with the Second Amendment's long-standing effect as one of the original freedoms guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, its alteration would be met with fervent opposition (Ulrich, M. R. 2019). However, this law can be interpreted differently when viewing it in the context of our current society. The debate circulating the right to bear arms ultimately boils down to a "classic case of eighteenth-century logic uncomfortably co-existing with twenty-first century reality and sensibility" (Mcnamara, 2017, p. 3). At the time, it was "sensible" to the framers to allow the ownership of muskets and rifles to its early citizens as a symbolic gesture

that the government by the people and for the people was unafraid to allow the public to have weapons in contrast to British colonial rule. However, in today's "reality" the primary purpose of the right to bear arms has lost its original meaning. Arguable, our framers never envisioned the invention of automatic weapons with high capacity and more lethal ammunition to enter the public domain, however they wisely included the clause "well-regulated militia" to circumvent the abuse of military grade weapons by the public. In recent law and court cases the implications of a "well-regulated militia" have been explored and deliberated in which "rapid firing semi-automatic rifles have been deemed to be appropriate to this category of weapon even though their rate of fire exceeds their technological antecedents by a factor of (conservatively) twenty or more" (Mcnamara, 2017, p.4).

Although the sentimental attachment and legal barriers present in the United States can put a halt to implementing regulation like that of Australia, nevertheless these aspects can be circumvented with the help of public pressure. The main difference between Australian gun control activism and American activism is that there is no singular body working to the common policy goal of common-sense gun law. Once America can acknowledge that the majority of gun owners are responsible and simply partake in recreational use, the only way to reach them is by framing the unlimited availability of guns as a potential public safety hazard because they are inherently dangerous and can cause a safety crisis when in the wrong hands. Currently in The United States, there is no national coalition like the NCGC to hold public pressure over government officials to impose laws that will restrict the availability of such deadly products.

Public Health Solution

By categorizing America's gun problem as a public safety concern in need of regulation, a public health approach could bring all parties together towards enacting gun reform. This

approach has been utilized in the United States to tackle several social issues and prevent future instances of injury and violence most notably in the case of motor vehicle accidents (Hemenway & Miller, 2013). Conducting quantifiable research in a multitude of disciplines to formulate an alternative solution to the continued occurrence of mass shootings in America frames the issue as a matter of preserving the safety and security of the daily lives of American citizens, rather than restricting or limiting American citizens of their rights. This may remove the strong cultural association to guns and help the opposition view gun reform as a practical, science-based solution that does not strip them of their possessions but prevents future violence.

The major decrease in motor vehicle accidents over the years is a prime example of implementing the public health approach to solve issues of public safety without enacting strict regulations on the individuals driving cars themselves. Comparatively, the U.S. should be able to pursue similar studies that address the lack of gun safety in America and how to solve the issue through varying fields of study (Hemenway & Miller, 2013). Being that “more Americans die from guns than from motor vehicle accidents and have done so for several years now, especially as deaths from the latter have been declining and death from guns have been on the rise” it is time America’s gun problem receives the proper analysis and reform necessary to curb future damage to public health like that of motor vehicles (Galea & Abdalla, 2019, p. 2).

Through a health approach, it is viable that many sensible policies could help reduce our gun problem like that of motor vehicle accidents. For instance, reform should be made regarding gun manufacturing by including unique serial numbers that cannot be easily obliterated, creating new pistols that would allow fingerprinting access (Hemenway & Miller, 2013). Gun manufacturers could also be held legally responsible for their distributors to help ensure that guns do not easily get into the wrong hands. Manufacturers can further reduce gun accidents by

modifying guns so they can't go off when dropped, as well as implementing a childproof lock to the design like that of aspirin bottles. This is just one example in which multidisciplinary research to preventing mass shootings in America can be achieved through science-based gun reform. Rather than blame the adolescent or the parents, manufacturers can easily change the gun and prevent the problem. (Galea & Abdalla, 2019)

Conclusion

The Australian approach to gun control should be feasible in the U.S. despite the strong gun culture and legal strength of the second amendment. Due to the specific language used in the Second Amendment, the phrase "well-regulated militia" can be interpreted to allow for some restriction on the availability of guns to the public. While some want to go straight for policy and legal action, the nation should first successfully reframe the issue as a pressing public safety concern. Thus, removing the symbolic meaning behind the inanimate object of a gun and allowing for a comparison to motor vehicle, tobacco, and alcohol regulation. To ensure the safe usage by the public, new reform must not only modify law and policy, but modify gun safety design, licensing, and training aspects as well. This paper set out an ambitious journey to explore the influence of media framing and the relationship between Americas political party system and the gun lobby, but transitioned into research on the cultural dimensions behind gun control policy. Further exploration of the interactions of government officials and pro-gun lobbies in the U.S. and news coverage surrounding the crisis may be a new avenue to continue research on America's inability to enact significant gun reform in recent decades when it's been needed the most.

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