

# **GUN CONTROL: WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE**

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By

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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While there have been many great strides in advancing technology, the United States still faces extremely high mortality rates from issues that are potentially preventable. Two such examples are deaths related to firearms and cancer. The latter is the second leading cause of death in the United States according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021). According to the Gun Violence Archive (2021), there was, on average, more than one mass shooting per day with a total of 417 occurring in 2019 based on a definition of at least four people being shot in the incident.

Given the sheer number of deaths involved in these two cases, the desire to reduce such a large number was enough to warrant further exploration. The technical research paper seeks to develop a regression model using machine learning algorithms in order to predict the rate of death of lung cancer in the state of Virginia. By analyzing certain demographic statistics, the model attempts to isolate certain parameters that increase an individual's chances of dying from lung cancer.

The science, technology and society (STS) paper attempts to find a solution that appeases both sides while decreasing the current rate of mass shootings in America. It does so by analyzing the social groups involved in gun control and how each impacts the development of new regulations pertaining to firearms. Giving background knowledge of the current laws pertaining to firearms, the paper then identifies the key social groups and explains how they interact with each other in the legislative process for gun control through the use of the Social Construction of Technology framework developed by Bijker and Pinch (1984). Finally, the paper utilizes different ethics frameworks in order to develop potential solutions that would be accepted by both sides of the debate and could significantly reduce the number of casualties resulting from gun violence.

Linking the STS research with the technical research gives a better perspective on how more can be done to try and prevent deaths related to the aforementioned topics. While a perfect solution for doing so is beyond the scope of this paper, this research still gives insight into the many issues involved in these two topics and gives a better understanding on what needs to be changed in order to create a meaningful impact.

## **PROBLEMS WITH CURRENT GUN CONTROL POLICIES**

In 2017 alone, the 13 deadliest shootings of that year caused 138 deaths according to Whitehead, Schnabel and Perry (2020). This fact alone has the potential to upset anyone and make them see that there is at the very least a problem with the status quo. Every year, over 30,000 people are killed by a firearm through means of homicide, suicide, or accident (Spitzer, 2020). According to Santhanam (2018), this puts the United States as the country with the second highest total number of gun related deaths. Santhanam's research also shows evidence that proves that the U.S. ranks second for the rate of gun-related suicide. Neither one of these statistics are something that The U.S. should be proud of for ranking so highly.

## **LAWS CONCERNING THE RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS**

The Second Amendment states that the federal government will not infringe on the people's right to bear arms, or, more specifically, "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed" ("United States of America", 2013, n.p.). The amendment was put into place to ensure that the citizens of the United States would be able to protect themselves from others.

Current federal law also includes restrictions based on age, background, and security clearance level. Laws on Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (n.d.) has an extensive list of the laws and regulations concerning firearms where one can find the following acts and more. The current legal age to purchase a firearm is 18 as set by the Gun Control Act of 1968 (“Gun Control Act”, 1968) to prevent minors whose brains are not fully developed from acquiring such a weapon that can do so much damage. As established by the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act (“Brady Handgun”, 1993), all states are required to impose background checks prior to purchasing a firearm to try and prevent former and potential criminals from obtaining one. Finally, limitations exist on what classes of weapons civilians can own, such as making rocket launchers and explosive devices illegal for most citizens if you do not have the required security clearance through the implementation of the National Firearms Act of 1934 (“National Firearms Act”, 1934).

States also have their own set of laws that can apply added restrictions on top of the federally mandated ones. Giffords Law Center is an organization that, with the purpose of ending gun violence, protects and implements laws and programs to make the country safer and they have compiled a comprehensive list of all of the specific laws pertaining to firearms for each individual state. In some of these states, firearms have become highly regulated and a permit is required to even be allowed to buy a gun. These states include Illinois, Massachusetts, and New York. California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and the District of Columbia all have a ban on assault weapons. All of the aforementioned states also have restrictions on legal magazine capacity limits, number of bullets in the clip, along with Colorado and Vermont (“Licensing”, 2020).

Others have a waiting period between the time you try and purchase a gun at which point the background check begins being processed and the time that you are actually in possession of the firearm (“Licensing”, 2020). All of these laws have been put into place for the goal of decreasing the number of deaths related to firearms every year. However, as proven by many of the statistics already mentioned, they are clearly not doing enough and something else needs to change.

## **ANALYZING THE RELEVANT SOCIAL GROUPS**

Often times the gun control debate is simplified into two categories of Republicans and Democrats. However, this does not accurately reflect the feelings of all those that do not agree with their party alignments policies. Therefore, a more accurate representation would be pro- vs. anti- gun control. These two terms better encompass the feelings of the people on each side of the debate.

In order to better understand the discussion of gun control, it is useful to understand the different groups that are most affected by it. The Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) (Bijker & Pinch, 1984) is about the theory that describes how social factors and groups can affect technological advancements and changes. In relation to gun control, SCOT would define the technology as the system of legislation that enacts the policies surrounding firearms.

As seen in Figure 1 on page 5, the stakeholders in this system center around the policy makers who create the bills that impose regulations. The other key stakeholders include school personnel and administrators that have to worry about protecting their students from a mass shooting, pro-gun groups such as the NRA that must lobby to protect the rights of their supporters, the general public that elects the legislators, anti-gun groups such as March for Our

Lives (MFOL) that lobby for more regulations, students and parents that work to get more safety precautions implemented at their schools, as well as law enforcement officials that have to uphold any restrictions put into place by the policy makers.

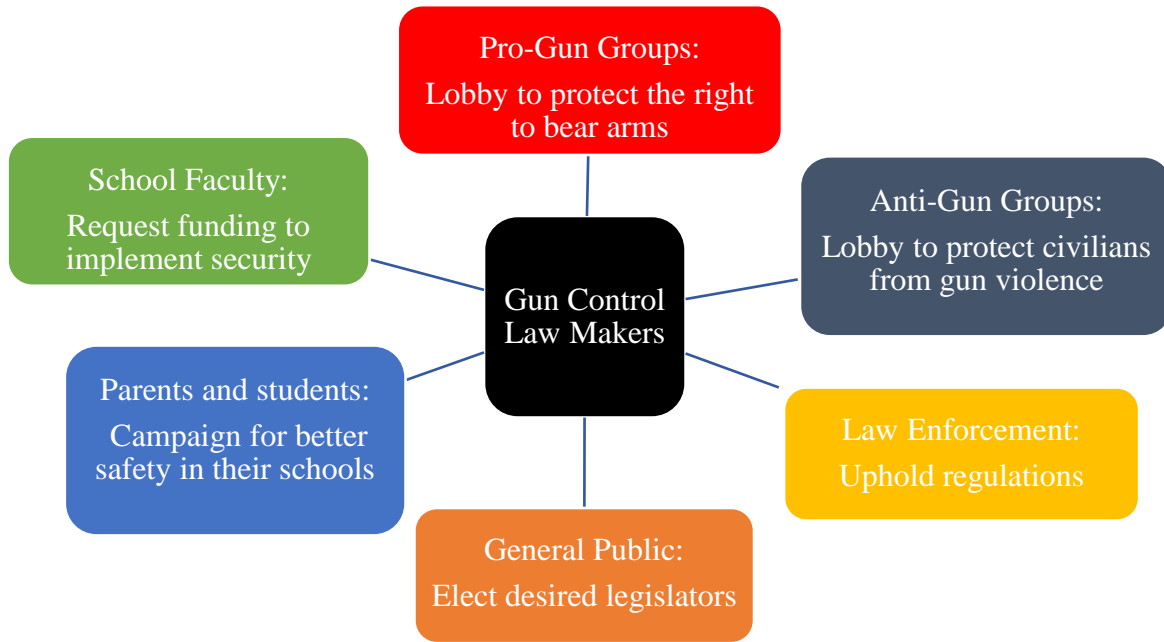


Figure 1: Gun Control Legislation SCOT Model: The legislators responsible for implementing gun control must adhere to the opinions and interests of specific social groups (Hamlin, 2021).

Having a better understanding of who the key stakeholders are in this system of legislation makes for a better capability to analyze the interactions between them. Analyzing how these social groups affect the law makers, as previously described, is necessary in order to understand how certain policies and created. However, it is also necessary to understand how each group interacts with each other.

Figure 2 (p. 6) depicts how each of these groups affect one another. Beginning with the general public, the members might choose to join either a pro- or anti-gun control organization depending on their belief system. Along with this, their taxes fund the law enforcement agencies

in exchange for protection and ensuring the laws are upheld. The parents and students will request certain safety precautions from the school administration in order to feel comfortable at school. The pro-gun control groups, such as MFOL, and pro-gun groups, including the NRA, will campaign against each other in order for the policy makers to implement their desired legislation.

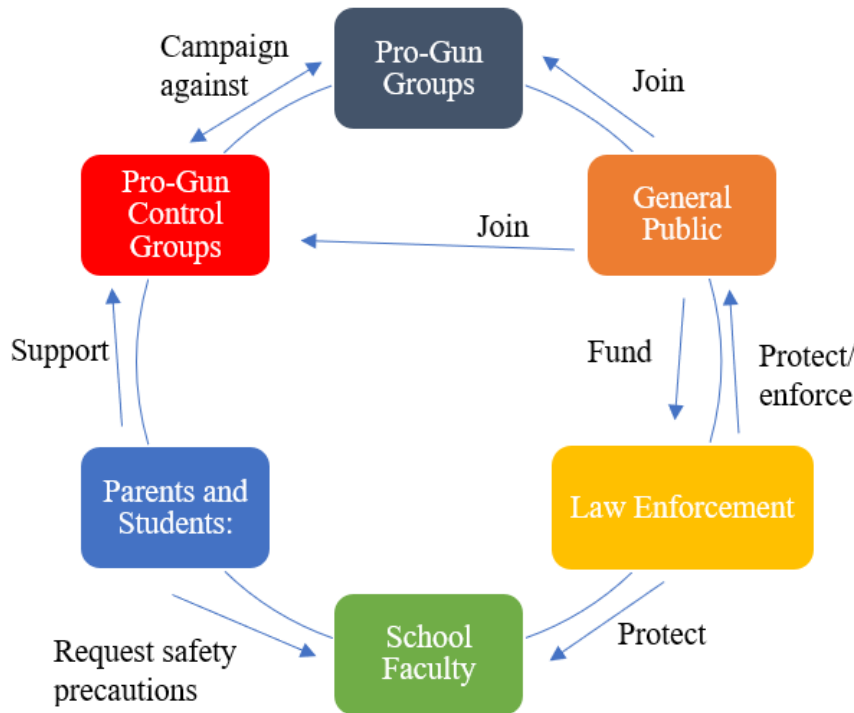


Figure 2: Interactions of Key Social Groups in Gun Control Legislation: Each stakeholder affects or is affected by others. These relationships form the system that shapes gun control (Hamlin, 2021).

Analyzing how each of these stakeholders interact is key to understanding how they shape gun control through the legislators. With the SCOT framework defined, understanding the current opinions of the opposing sides is possible. In order to do so, it is necessary then to look at the reasoning behind their arguments.

## **REASONS THE 2<sup>ND</sup> AMENDMENT IS OUTDATED**

Pro-gun control citizens have often argued that when a gun owner attempts to use a firearm to prevent a crime, the owner ends up being killed more often than the offender is killed (Jacobs 2020). This fact would theoretically nullify any potential argument that guns are used for protection as this statistic would prove otherwise.

Another concerning factor is that the increased capabilities of modern firearms, such as the AR-15, give users the ability to fire more rounds in a shorter time frame. Even though a handgun is more likely to be the weapon used in a mass shooting, assault rifles accounted for almost 40 percent of deaths in such incidents and almost 70 percent of injuries since 1999, even though they were only used in a little over 25 percent of all mass shootings according to Canipe and Gamio (2019).

According to Whitehead, Schnabel and Perry (2020), there were a total of 138 deaths that occurred from only the 13 deadliest mass shootings of that year. Many experts attribute these types of incidents to those struggling with a mental illness. This is supported by the findings of Meszaros (2017) that showed a negative impact on the use of firearms and frequency of mass shootings due to a decline in mental health care services. To help try and decrease this effect, research was done by Laqueur and Wintemute (2019) to try and develop new gun control policies that could be implemented into legislation. These policies would hopefully prevent individuals suffering from mental illness, that could be a danger to themselves or others, from acquiring a gun in the first place. Laqueur and Wintemute (2019) did so by studying methods that could try and predict who these so-called high-risk individuals are, so they could be flagged and barred from purchasing a firearm. While the policies they came up with were never implemented so there is no way of truly knowing whether or not they would work, one has to



wonder if these types of laws could potentially bring about a decrease in the tragedies that are happening all too often.

## **REASONS THE 2<sup>ND</sup> AMENDMENT SHOULD STILL APPLY TODAY**

Jacobs (2020) would argue that owning a gun is similar to life insurance in that it is better to have it in case the occasion arises where it could be necessary rather than to not have it and be left defenseless. As previously stated, victims possessing a firearm were more often killed in a confrontation than the attacker. However, Jacobs found that in many cases, the mere presence of a gun in the victim's possession can be enough to deter the offender. Jacobs reported that it's estimated that there are over 1.3 million instances of a gun owner using a firearm to prevent a potential crime being committed against them without ever actually firing the weapon.

Additionally, Jacobs also found that only about seven percent of all violent crimes contained the use of a firearm, and less than a quarter of robberies and aggravated assaults had a firearm present. Incidents of theft perpetrated by a wielder of a knife or other such weapon resulted in a much lower frequency of injury, likely due to the threat of a gun being more likely to discourage a bystander from intervening compared to someone holding a firearm.

The argument of self-defense is the most frequently used reasoning for why an owner possesses a firearm. According to Stroebe, Leander, and Kruglanski (2017), over 60 percent of gun owners cited protection as their number one influence on their decision to acquire a firearm. This argument is supported by Lott's findings (1992) which showed strong evidence that concealed-handgun laws led to a significant decrease in violent crimes. He also says that despite the trend of more populated urban areas being against allowing concealed handgun licenses,

these areas tend to be ones that benefit the most. This shows that even if there are proven benefits, humans tend to stick to their original beliefs, even if that means they are wrong.

To further motivate anti-gun control sentiment, it was found that a majority of mass shooters passed a background check as they are more often than not first-time offenders in accordance to Law's findings (2019). It is hard to argue that there should be stricter and more in-depth background checks if the people that we would be trying to prevent are still able to pass such checks.

Since each side has many statistics that they can find and cite, they both leave out certain contextual information or they do not give full facts in order to push their agenda. Both groups have such an emotional investment in this debate that they are unwilling to hear the arguments of the other. Since mass shootings create a deep emotional response, any argument that goes against what someone believes is ignored, as they refuse to believe that their view is wrong.

## **USING ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS TO DEVELOP A SOLUTION**

In order to develop a solution for any problem, one must make a decision on what their solution will be trying to accomplish and understand the effects it will have on different social groups. In doing so, it can be very beneficial to utilize ethics theory in determining what result you hope to achieve. According to Martin and Schinzinger (2000), there are three moral frameworks one can utilize in trying to make such a decision. The first framework is rights ethics. This form of ethics seeks to find a solution that upholds the rights every human inherently has. "Rights ethics is distinctive in that it makes human rights the ultimate appeal—the moral bottom line" (Martin & Schinzinger, 2000, p. 49). The second framework is duty ethics. Duty ethics is very similar to rights ethics as they both seek to uphold the rights of an individual.

However, duty ethics focuses on the actions of an individual in that they have a duty to respect others' rights. Finally, utilitarianism is the framework that suggests that the action is not what one should focus on, but rather the consequence. Utilitarianism seeks to "produce the most good for the most people, giving equal consideration to everyone affected" (Martin & Schinzinger, 2000, p. 55). Understanding these three frameworks allows one to have a better understanding of what their solution to a problem should be trying to accomplish.

In relation to the discussion of gun control, these three frameworks can be used to find a solution to the current problem of mass shootings and other improper uses of firearms while also taking into account the rights and opinions of both pro- and anti- gun control supporters. In doing so, potential solutions can be found for each individual framework that can give an outcome best suited to the one chosen.

## **WAYS TO POTENTIALLY DECREASE MASS SHOOTING INSTANCES**

With the increase in mass shootings over recent years, Dahmen (2018) would attribute this partly to the increase in media coverage rather than the modern technological advances that have allowed for greater capabilities of firearms. He discovered that when compared to the victims of mass shootings, the shooter's picture was shown almost 16 times more. While not intended to glorify the shooter, it still gives them the attention they often desire. Taking this away could be one solution to at least reducing the frequency with which mass shootings happen. This solution would utilize utilitarianism since its goal would be to decrease the likelihood of another mass shooting. However, many would argue that the right to information is something that everyone has and taking this away could really upset many as they wouldn't hear about any events even if they were to occur which violates the framework of rights ethics. While this could

actually create some very positive changes, it would likely upset too many people to ever actually become policy.

According to the Violence Policy Center (VPC), the difference between gun related deaths and motor vehicle related deaths in the U.S. has been steadily decreasing for the last two decades. This is in part due to motor vehicle deaths declining but also due to firearm-related deaths increasing. Why is this the case? Required safety courses could be the answer.

Both motor vehicles and firearms are products that were designed as tools to help users accomplish a certain goal, but they both have the great potential to seriously injure or kill oneself and those around you if not used properly and with great attention to safety precautions. The same way you ensure your car is off before filling it up with gas, you should always check that a firearm is unloaded prior to doing practically anything with it.

However, this type of advice is simply not taught except through voluntary courses or by being passed down from another gun user. Unless a gun owner takes it upon themselves to go take a course or has a friend/ relative that can teach them, they will not learn some essential safety in handling and storing a firearm. With more guns than people in the U.S. according to Russo (2013), the likelihood of someone interacting with a firearm at some point in their lifetime is pretty high. Therefore, these types of safety practices should not only be taught to current and future gun owners, but also to everyone else as they could come in handy in the event that they interact with one. Parents who own a firearm should also be taught proper storage of a gun to prevent accidental injuries or deaths by unknowing children. Children should be taught that if they find a gun, they should not touch it and immediately go find an adult.

All of these things have the potential to save even just one life, but they are simply not common knowledge. The lack of education on firearms is why the introduction of a mandatory

firearms training course could have some serious benefits. Not only would it give the knowledge needed to safely handle a firearm to future gun owners, but it could also be taught to those who have no intention or desire to own a gun, but have a very real chance of coming into contact with someone who does at some point in their lifetime. Such a course would likely be easier to implement than most other gun control policies.

The reason is because rather than adding more restrictions regarding what citizens can own what types of firearms, it simply adds an extra step to getting the firearm and would not exclude any person who desired to acquire a gun for themselves, so long as they have the willingness to actually take the course. Therefore, the anti-gun control supporters would be much more likely to agree to such a requirement as they are not anti-safety, they just fear their rights being taken away. Of course, there would be some who see even this as too much of an overstep by the government, but if it led to a decrease in firearm-related deaths, it would be worth it.

The pro-gun control groups would likely support this to some extent as well as it is promoting safety for everyone. However, there would likely be those who oppose it simply because they want nothing to do with firearms. They would not want their children learning about them because they are afraid of them. Nevertheless, this simply is not a viable long-term stance as they are highly likely to have to interact with a gun at some point in time as they likely are not going anywhere anytime soon. It is better to be safe with the knowledge and skill of what to do in a situation involving a gun than to be caught unaware of what to do in that moment.

This solution utilizes rights ethics by ensuring that every citizen who was previously able to obtain a firearm is still able to as pro-gun supporters believe it is their right to own a gun as established by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment. This course also seeks to accomplish utilitarianism beliefs by providing benefit to the largest number of people. There will certainly be people against this, but

it would potentially make The United States a safer place and therefore most people would benefit from this safety course being implemented into policy.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The purpose of this paper was not to develop a solution that would eradicate firearm-related crime with ease. Instead, the goal was to bring to light the issues of the current discussion and why the US has not seen any viable changes in gun control that have led to any significant change in decreasing the frequency of these tragic events. The proposed solutions are merely meant to provide potential changes that might make at least a small difference. Misuse of firearms is not going to go away overnight, but through civil discussions and proper research, solutions can be developed that benefit both parties and make the United States a safer place.

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