

Gun Violence Stalemate:
Why Proponents of Gun Regulations in the U.S. Have Failed

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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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From January 1 to February 28, 2023, there were 71 mass shootings in each of which at least 4 people were shot in the United States (GVA, 2023). Many families and communities are in anguish, but this is nothing new. From 2019 through 2022, mass murders in each of which at least 4 people were killed, averaged 29 a year (GVA, 2023). Ninety-four percent of Americans say that gun violence is a problem to some degree (PRC, 2021). Yet gun regulation advocacies such as Everytown, Brady Campaign, and Giffords have so far achieved little. They are opposed by groups such as the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) and National Rifle Association (NRA) which favor more security, more guns, and fewer restrictions (NRA, 2022). These methods have also proven fruitless in significantly reducing gun violence. Amidst the stalemate, more Americans are dying. On February 13, 2023, a gunman opened fire in a Michigan State University classroom, killing three and critically wounding five (MSU DPPS, 2023). How have the social groups that are engaged in this struggle reached this stalemate?

In the U.S., proponents of efforts to promote regulations that would reduce gun violence have failed because powerful defenders of gun rights have strategically characterized them as opponents of esteemed traditions, self defense and personal liberty. In this competition, gun rights advocates have found an advantage in a popular culture that celebrates guns, gun owners, and gun violence.

Review of Research

Much of the research on gun violence in America is prescriptive. Recommendations include personalized firearms (Teret & Webster, 2 1999), mental health help for children exposed to violence (Garbarino et al., 2002), sanctions and incentives (Tita et al., 2010), waiting periods

(Ludwig, 2017), reduced media coverage of murderers (Lankford & Silver, 2022), and threat assessment (Borum et al., 2010). Some researchers, however, have studied the political stalemate that thwarts effective gun control.

Hogan and Rood (2015) find “true believers,” people whose ideological commitments make them impervious to reason (Hoffer, 1951), on both sides. They see opposing views to be personal attacks on their way of life. Hogan and Rood suggest the answer lies in “good faith deliberation,” rhetorical criticism, and civic education by those who fall between either extreme. While in theory, good faith deliberation can be utilized to sway public opinion, so far it has proven unfruitful. And partisan hostility has grown in past years (PRC, 2022). Another article compares the gun control responses in Canada to the United States’ legislative gridlock. Kamal and Burton (2018) propose that, “Although the opinion of the NRA is not in line with that of the majority of the public, because of its great wealth and strong, consistent organization, the NRA generally gets its way in policy making.” They claim the Canadian counterpart, the National Firearm Association (NFA), does not hold as much influence. Based on NRA policies and actions, Kamal and Burton express a convincing viewpoint. However, they only address the NRA; more participant groups are needed in the analysis.

Throughout America’s socio-political history, major change has often been met with fierce opposition. Despite this, advocacy groups and individual participants in other domains have helped break through long standing stalemates. Recently, Greta Thunberg, has made a major impact on climate change visibility, rallying an estimated 13 million supporters (Strike Statistics, 2020). Sabherwal et al. (2021) refers to a new phenomenon called the “Greta Thunberg Effect” in which familiarity with Greta Thunberg has motivated collective action by promoting collective efficacy beliefs. Sabherwal et al. also indicate that Thunberg’s call to action could

inspire action across the political spectrum. During Thunberg's rise in 2018 and 2019, Americans saw a record 73% population belief in climate change (Ballow et al., 2022). Like global climate change, gun violence in the US is an intensely polarizing problem with grave consequences.

To accurately diagnose the American gun control stalemate, prior work can be drawn upon, but more evidence is needed. Specifically, major advocacies on both sides must be analyzed as well as the effects of the social norms in entertainment and media.

Gun Rights Approach

The most apparent opposition that anti-gun advocates face is the gun lobby. The Giffords Courage to Fight Gun Violence advocacy labels them as the primary obstacle, "The gun lobby's radical and profit-driven agenda is what stands in the way of a safer country. The NRA's and NSSF's lobbyists push lawmakers to make it as easy as possible to buy a gun and to oppose any restrictions on firearms" (Giffords, n.d.). The gun lobby does not promote these objectives. Rather, they hold firm the values of personal liberty and self defense, citing centuries old Second Amendment roots. They identify those who oppose them, not as proponents of public safety, but as threats to their core beliefs. Pro-gun groups not only believe that gun control groups are the enemies of freedom, they also believe that these groups stand in the way of making a secure nation. These convictions are evident in the "What is the NRA?" statement: "Every day, the NRA fights back against politicians, judges, and bureaucrats who want to regulate, restrict, and ultimately, destroy your Second Amendment freedom" (NRA, n.d.).

The gun lobby fights all forms of gun control, from background checks to assault rifle bans. Many organizations take pride in a "no compromise" stance, fearing a domino effect. The Gun Owners of America (GOA) warns that universal background checks are "a stepping stone

for further anti-gun actions in the future” (Smoloski, 2023). Eighty-one percent of Americans support universal background checks (PRC, 2021). The National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) advocates against “Illinois’ unconstitutional gun and magazine ban,” claiming, “It only deprives law-abiding Americans from being able to exercise their full spectrum of Second Amendment rights” and does not punish criminals (NSSF, 2023).

The gun lobby’s solution to reduce gun violence is more firearms in the hands of “good” citizens. The National Association for Gun Rights wants to remove “deadly gun-free zones” claiming, “The best way to combat a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun” (NAGR, n.d.). In a promotion on their homepage, the NRA shares the heroic story of a man who took out a shooter with his concealed carry weapon (NRA, 2022). The NRA also prides itself as the country's leading firearms educator (NRA, n.d.). These are attempts to brand themselves as mentors and defenders of freedom and democracy, despite harrowing claims made by anti-gun activists.

Gun Control Approach

Gun control advocates do not want to get rid of all guns immediately. Rather, they seek to use a domino effect to slowly gain ground with the end goal of imposing heavy restrictions and bans on guns. Many advocacies want to appear party neutral and understanding of both sides. Some groups like Brady, Giffords, and Everytown believe the issue requires bipartisan cooperation. Their websites’ color schemes are predominantly red and blue, suggesting they appeal to both sides of the political divide. A statement from Brady’s legislation page reads, “We work with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to close loopholes in the current gun laws” (Brady, n.d.-a).

The primary tactic of these groups is to initially push seemingly reasonable “Common Sense Gun Laws.” “Keeping guns out of the wrong hands” is at the top of Everytown’s agenda. In an effort to not appear threatening to gun rights proponents, agenda items pertaining to “holding the gun industry accountable,” and “prohibiting assault weapons” are at the bottom of the page, requiring the viewer to scroll down before reading (Everytown, n.d.-a). Similarly, Brady’s first objective is to pass background check legislation, followed by more aggressive restrictions and bans (Brady, n.d.-c).

Grassroot campaigns are another method in which gun control advocacies attempt to appear amicable and sincere. Under Everytown, there are “grassroots” organizations: Moms Demand Action, and Students Demand Action among others. With compelling names, and personal stories, these anti-gun groups attempt to connect with large demographics (Everytown, n.d.-b).

Hostile Tactics Lead to Inaction

Stemming from each side’s deeply held beliefs, the issue of gun control has become politically polarized. Pro-gun and anti-gun extremists alike have contributed to a hostile environment that makes cooperation difficult. The Mad Dog Pac financed a billboard that amplifies polarization (fig. 1). Likewise, the NRA also publicized provocative material (fig 2).



Figure 1: Anti-NRA and gun lobby billboard seen on W st Pensacola, FL. in 2018 (Jake Newby, 2018)



Figure 2: Unflattering billboard image captured in Tennessee 2012 criticizing Representative Debra Maggart's stance on gun control. (Eric Schelzig, 2012)

And according to the Virginia Center for Public Safety, the NRA used to have a record—since taken down—on their website of what some call the “enemies list,” a table of hundreds of anti-gun organizations and persons (VACPS, n.d.). These propaganda mediums can have an effect on how quickly a solution can be reached. According to Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus

(2013), “[In] a polarized environment ... a strengthened partisan identity causes party endorsements to carry the day.” Citing this research, Hetherington and Rudolph (2015) claim that polarization leads to ineffective governance and political stalemates.

Pop Culture Promotes Violence

Not only are anti-gun participants working against pro-gun participants, they are also battling against a culture that immerses itself in the glorification of guns and murder which desensitizes the population. Desensitization is of concern to gun control advocates, as popular support is critical in breaking the status quo. According to Bali, Robinson, and Winder (2020), “duty” and “altruism” are the leading psychological drivers behind voter turnout.

Violence in TV and Film

In a survey of 1000 adults in the U.S, 54% of respondents stated that true crime has a neutral to positive effect on society; while 44% claimed it sensationalizes violence and desensitizes people to it. (YouGov, 2022). Small, local social groups such as *Nashville Murderinos* and *Murderinos and Mimosas*, with a few hundred members each, boast their communities’ obsessions with true crime shows and books. Their sign off, “Stay sexy, don’t get murdered” playfully juxtaposes romance and death (Meetup, n.d.).

In the three “John Wick” films of the last decade, the protagonist, John Wick, shoots and stabs 250 characters, amid blood and gore (Stahelski, 2014, 2017, 2019). The series grossed half a billion dollars; each movie approximately doubled the revenue its predecessor earned (The Numbers, n.d.). Producers have recognized this success; another installment is set to release in 2023. Comparable action and horror films include the Kingsman films (2015, 2017, 2021), *The*

Joker (2019), and *American Psycho* (2000). Director Quentin Tarantino, known for making particularly gorey films, deflects criticism: “I’m not responsible for what some person does after they see a movie. I have one responsibility. My responsibility is to make characters and to be as true to them as I possibly can” (Seigel, 1993).

Pro-gun Advocacies Deflect Criticism

In the wake of the 2012 Newtown Connecticut mass shooting, the NSSF called on Hollywood to “stop obsession with violent entertainment, which both coarsens our culture and has a desensitizing effect upon impressionable youths” (NSSF, 2013). The NRA released a press statement with a similar sentiment, “There exists in this country a callous, corrupt and *corrupting* shadow industry that sells, and sows, violence against its own people” (NYT, 2012). Yet, these statements may appear merely deflective to some. In its own press release, Everytown noted that while the NRA and its president, Oliver North speak out against violence in video games, North was a “script consultant and voice actor for the violent video game Call of Duty: Black Ops II” (Everytown, 2018).

In a review of violence in PG-13 films as a cause of real violence, Fergeson and Markey (2019) conclude there is no correlation. They claimed one possible explanation: those who are consuming media are occupied and have less time to commit crime. On the contrary, Fanti et al. (2009) found that desensitization to violence can occur after continuous exposure over a short period of time. According to Krahé et al. (2011), desensitization effects occur only when participants view violent content. And Mrug, Madan and Windle (2016) claim, “emotional desensitization to violence in early adolescence contributes to serious violence in late adolescence.” Aggregating these findings would lead to the conclusion that consuming violent

content can lead to increased violence, especially among youth. According to Anderson and Bushman's study (2001), "Violent media exposure can reduce helping behavior in precisely the way predicted by major models of helping and desensitization theory. People exposed to media violence become "comfortably numb" to the pain and suffering of others and are consequently less helpful." Published research disputes the claim that those who consume violent content are more likely to become violent, while supporting the claim that consuming violent content leads to desensitization.

Overall, gun control groups are not as vocal about blood and gore in entertainment, whereas pro-gun groups have been quick to attack the entertainment industry as a gateway to violence. As they are presented, these tactics are indicative of scapegoating and deflection. Generally, anti-gun advocates have solely placed blame on the lack of gun control laws and regulations.

Film Industry and the Public

Harmful desensitization effects are often caused by an intentionally ambiguous entertainment industry. Advocates for gun control are beginning to speak up about this issue as they recognize the dangers. An open statement put forth by Brady and signed by many prominent directors in the film industry states, "Our goal is primarily to entertain, but we also acknowledge that stories have the power to effect change. Cultural attitudes toward smoking, drunk driving, seatbelts and marriage equality have all evolved due in large part to movies' and TV's influence. It's time to take on gun safety... We are asking writers, directors and producers to be mindful of on-screen gun violence and model gun safety best practices" (Brady n.d.-b).

The repentant language may not be substantive. In a study of 211 movies, Jacobsen et al. (2001) collected seatbelt compliance data in Hollywood films and typical civilian life (fig. 3).

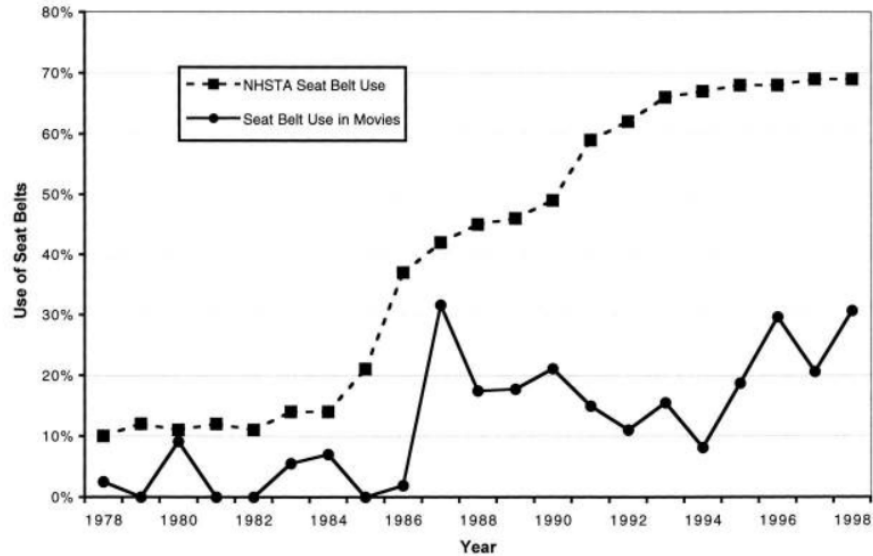


Figure 3: Seat belt usage in the film movies compared to seatbelts in daily use from 1978 to 1998. (Author; data from Jacobsen et al. 2001)

The data shows that movies had no effect on seatbelt usage, and merely followed trends that were already emerging. This data is contrary to the aforementioned agenda; it appears there was no agenda. It suggests the film industry is neither honest nor transparent. The Hollywood Compassion Coalition has a decorous name and claims they are “inspiring positive social change,” yet the positive values that they inspire aside from “kindness” and “diversity” are untraceable on their site (HCC, n.d.).

The precise effect that the film industry and entertainment has on political issues is difficult to quantify. According to Kendall’s (2009) empirical data analysis of 996 top actors and their political contributions, “Film politics matters for “real” politics—in fact, they are often indistinguishable. Film stars and other Hollywood personnel frequently consult on public relations and make campaign appearances and substantial monetary contributions to political campaigns.” Like with other cultural issues, true support from the film industry may help to

promote gun control and alert viewers to the importance of the problem. Conversely, current trends may perpetuate the adverse effect.

Media Portrayal of Violence

The way in which the media portrays gun violence criminals is yet another challenge that gun control advocates face. In many cases, media groups sensationalize deadly stories, giving publicity to murders and criminals. Careless and money-driven reporting creates a platform for gun violence, giving rise to copycat crimes. Researchers Lankford and Madfis (2018) claim that perpetrators of violent crimes have explicitly admitted to seeking fame through media publicity; 11% of shooters' statements were "obviously fame seeking." By these standards, eliminating unwarranted notoriety may have a compounding effect, decreasing gun violence over time.

No Notoriety is an advocacy whose mission is to spread awareness about the harm media can cause. Their subtitle is "No Name. No Photo. No Notoriety."(No Notoriety, n.d.). In 2021, Brady hosted a podcast with No Notoriety to discuss the idea's potential (Brady, 2021). In a striking 4 minute twitter video, the NRA spokesman proposed legislation be enacted to prevent the media from glorifying shooters. However, in the video he retracted his previous statements, explaining that would infringe on First Amendment rights to free speech and should upset people. In his closing remarks, he clarified he strongly believes news sources are creating a platform for shooters, but media First Amendment rights—like Second Amendment rights—should remain untouched in the struggle (NRATV, 2018). The message supports the idea that historic rights should supersede current solutions, even if they are sound. And only methods that do not infringe on established liberties should be pursued.

While laws have not been passed, some news outlets have taken the matter into their own hands. As of February 2018, the Daily Wire announced it “will no longer be publishing any names or photographs of mass shooters” (Shapiro, 2018). McBride and Castio (2021) of National Public Radio (NPR) suggest in an editorial, American newsrooms’ efforts, including NPR’s, have failed to act consistently when omitting killers’ names and images. They shared NPR’s new work-in-progress guidelines for reporting: use identifying information only when relevant to the story or necessary to prevent mass confusion.

Conclusion

Despite their hard fought efforts, proponents of gun regulations have yet to enact meaningful change. In light of the evidence, the American gun control stalemate can be attributed to three central factors: fierce and uncompromising gun rights advocates, polarized and hostile participants, and a desensitized population. Gun lobbies carry immense influence and can overrule public sentiments and anti-gun advocacies. They have also strategically made it their mission to not compromise. They block even the least restrictive efforts such as universal background checks, and are not willing to entertain sound rhetoric criticism. Polarization forms as a result. In attempts to excite their own supporters, and take down the opposition, both sides use aggressive tactics, deepening the divide and making reasoned discourse more difficult. The gun control advocates lack a fully realized base. The entertainment and news cultures that surround Americans desensitize them and slow their political reactions. Most Americans view gun violence as an issue, but few have taken the tangible action required to combat the powerful gun lobby. Therefore, the gun lobby’s success is tied to cultural tendencies.

By addressing the social and structural issues in tandem, advocates across a variety of sociopolitical domains can effectively foster change. The gun lobby will fight relentlessly. Direct opposition will only strengthen their resolve. Gun control advocates may find success in wearing away the social norms surrounding gun violence and garnering more active support. Historically, mobilizing behind an effective social leader, such as Thurnberg, has proven effective for change. Researchers should investigate how advocacies have appealed to their supporters and how proponents of gun rights have grown more hostile to compromise. By answering these questions, gun control advocates could gain a deeper insight into overcoming the obstacles they face.

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