

**HOW EMOTION CREATES COMMUNICATION BARRIERS IN THE GUN
CONTROL DEBATE**
(STS Research Paper)

FIREARM EDUCATION COURSE
(Technical Paper)

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Technical Project Team Members

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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
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INTRODUCTION

Firearms have been in the news more and more frequently in recent years. With the increase in mass shootings, the conversation of gun control has become an extremely polarized conversation. No one can get put their differences aside to work together to find a compromise that benefits both sides. My research topic will try to understand why this is. I will attempt to learn what is holding us back from progress by studying the communication barriers people feel surrounding this debate. This should give me a better view on how emotions create communication barriers for topics that have very polarized opinions similar to the gun control debate.

For my technical topic, the project will try and help make the public more informed on firearms. Therefore, the intention is to develop an application that would provide users with an online course about firearm safety. If more people were taught to respect these weapons rather than fear them, I believe that they could continue to be used for the right purposes and decrease the number of incidents of being used for the wrong reasons.

TECHNICAL TOPIC

For my technical topic, the goal is to try and cut down on the number of incidents where a firearm is used for crime. I believe that if more people were taught to respect these weapons from an early age, they wouldn't fear them so much and also would be used properly. Currently, for untrained gun owners that reveal a firearm for personal protection during a crime, the owner is more often killed with that firearm than the perpetrator is. This happens for multiple reasons including anything from not knowing how to work the safety, not knowing how to insert the magazine, not knowing how to cock it, to not knowing how to fire it.

In order to prevent these types of things, I aim to develop the equivalent of a driver's ed course for firearms. A car is something that a majority of the population uses frequently. They are a tool that was designed for great reasons to help us move faster, but have caused many unfortunate accidents as well. People are injured or killed all the time in car accidents so we realized we needed to make a course to teach users how to properly use them. We wanted them to understand that while they can do a lot of good, they can also do a lot of harm if not being used properly. This is the same thing for firearms. So why aren't we being taught how to use and respect them?

For me and many others, the task of teaching about firearm safety fell to my parents. However, many parents don't agree with the use of firearms. I would like to try and change these beliefs to see that if we are taught how to use them for the right reasons, they wouldn't be used for the wrong reasons as often as they currently are. Therefore, I believe a firearm education course could do a lot of good. This course could be used as a requirement that you must pass before being able to purchase a firearm as well. Currently, a background check just ensures that

you haven't committed any crimes and don't have certain mental illnesses. It does not check to see if the purchaser has any knowledge of how to use the gun they are buying.

Currently, these types of courses usually require you to be in person to get the training which requires you to be able to go to a firing range which not everyone has access to. My hope is to make a course that is easily available to the public that could teach you everything you need to know before purchasing a firearm. The only thing it wouldn't be able to provide someone is the actual ability to fire the weapon for practice but I believe this is still a very good first step before needing to do so.

This course would include instructional videos similar to a drivers ed course as well as frequent quizzes and a few tests throughout to ensure you learned the material. After completing it, you would be given a certification of completion that you could save to your device or print.

STS PROSPECTUS

My research motivation is my love of hunting. I was born and raised in Texas where hunting is a big part of my lifestyle. However, more and more these days we are seeing incidents of firearms being used in terrible ways. I needed to look more into this to find a good compromise to reduce the number of these incidents but not take away such a significant part of people's lives due to the action of a few. Better Engineering has allowed us to advance the capabilities of firearms tremendously. I decided to look more into where a line should be drawn to still allow people the sense of safety and protection they get when they own a firearm, but removes unnecessary capabilities that are used to hurt people. This led me to my research question. Why are we unwilling to communicate and compromise on this issue? Why has it become such a polarized topic of debate? Between 1982 and 2011, a mass shooting (4 or more people shot) occurred about every 200 days. Since 2011, it has become more common, occurring about every 64 days.

This topic is very important to me as I understand the feelings on both sides. If a mutually beneficial solution to this topic could be found, I believe it would bring back a peace of mind to anyone who's child is in school while still allowing such a large population to continue their livelihood. It's easy for someone who doesn't own a gun to say we should get rid of them all, but there is a large number of people who rely on hunting for food or who feel its need for personal protection, and you can't just take that away from them.

The system surrounding firearms is one that has been being developed for a long time, and probably isn't going anywhere anytime soon. What I would like to look into is ways that we

can modify this system to make guns be seen as more of a tool for protection and sport rather than a weapon of destruction. There are many groups that have a stake in this ranging from gun supporting groups such as hunters, outdoorsman, to more political groups such as the NRA and the law makes affecting policies surrounding firearms. Then you also have the anti-gun groups such as March for Our Lives which is an organization protesting firearms due to their use in mass school shootings.

Starting with the design of firearms, many advancements have been made to try and make them safer. These designs include safety mechanisms that prevent the gun from being fired when activated and trigger locks that prevent the gun from being used unless a code or a key unlocks it. There are also many items created to try and prevent them from falling into the wrong hands such as gun safes or cases. There are also numerous laws to try and prevent individuals that are deemed unfit to own a firearm from doing so. These laws include the Gun Control Act of 1968 that prevents former criminals from owning a firearm. There is also the National Firearms Act of 1934 which requires any firearm to be registered with the state. There is also the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act which put requirements of background checks on a majority of firearms transfers. Not included in those required transfers is a firearm purchased at a gun show. Many have called for this to be changed so that background checks are also required at these events. The NRA has long opposed background checks, not only for gun shows but the use of them for any purchase of a firearm. First of all, according to Bureau of Justice Statistics, less than one percent of criminals who were arrested for a firearm crime obtained that firearm through a gun show. They also argue that a majority of mass shooters passed a background check as they are more often than not first-time offenders. It's easy to see why the NRA has taken this stance given that it doesn't seem like background checks are preventing very much. However,

it's reasonable to understand the side of anti-gun groups that would like to expand background checks to actually make a difference. Both sides seem to agree that the current system isn't doing very much to prevent mass shootings, the question is, what can we change so that the new system does. It seems to me that both sides want the same overall outcome, less crimes committed with the use of a firearm, they just disagree on how to get there. So why does it seem like neither side is willing to compromise their agenda and instead would rather continue to perpetuate this system of disagreement where nothing is actually solved?

Another big area of this topic is the disagreements between the state and federal legislations regarding firearms. The 2nd amendment says that the federal government will not infringe on the people's right to bear arms. However, it does not say that the individual states are not allowed to do so. As such, firearms have become highly regulated in certain states or cities. In some of these states, a permit is required to even be allowed to buy a gun. Some states have a ban on assault weapons, magazine capacity limits (number of bullets in the clip), and/or a waiting period between the time you try and purchase a gun when the background check begins being processed and the time that you are actually in possession of the firearm.

My research topic would be to explore why the topic of gun debate has become such a politicized debate with both sides making it seem like a black and white issue when really it is much more complicated than that. I believe based on the research I have done that it has to do with the relationship between the emotional response of people surrounding firearms and how it relates to their willingness to compromise on this issue. I believe that since the topic of firearms carries an enormous emotional weight behind it, it has hindered our ability to compromise on this issue.

LITERARY REVIEW

In recent years, we have seen an increase in mass shootings that has accompanied an increase in protests in support of higher gun control. With the development of firearms such as the AR-15, we have seen an increase in number of people killed per one of these mass shootings as well. While a handgun is more commonly used in a shooting, the development of semiautomatic firearms has increased the shooters ability to cause more destruction.

The definition of what falls under the term “mass shooting” has long been debated. Many argue that mass shootings should not include incidents related to drug or gang violence. There is also a dispute as to whether an incident that included more than 4 victims but fewer than 4 fatalities should be included. For the purpose of this study, a mass shooting will be defined as any incident involving a firearm that resulted in the deaths of at least 4 people not including the offender.

Due to the spotlight being shone on such issues, the amount of research into mass shootings is quite extensive. Studies have been done on the types of mental illnesses that increases the likelihood for a person to become a mass shooter, cultural backgrounds that increase this likelihood, gender studies related to mass shootings, common firearms used in them, and much more. However, one area of this debate that requires more extensive research is why the two sides, pro- and anti-gun, refuse to listen to each other to come to a solution. This study will delve into this topic to determine what factors are holding us back from progress.

SUPPORT FOR GUN CONTROL

Simply put, the biggest reason people support gun control is the statistics. In 2017 alone, 138 deaths resulted from the 13 deadliest mass shootings according to Whitehead, Schnabel and Perry (2020). This is an average of over 10 people per shooting. Per year, over 30,000 people are

killed by a firearm through means of homicide, suicide, or accident (Spitzer, 2020). Statistics like these can easily induce emotion and it's understandable as to why. People on both sides don't want to see unnecessary death and seeing these high numbers would induce sadness and/or anger in most people.

One of the strongest arguments that gun supporters have is the second amendment. Written in the constitution, it says that the national government will not impede the right of the people to bear arms. However, any would argue that this is an outdated law given the advanced abilities that modern firearms have over their predecessors. When this law was written, it is believed that guns were not even as prevalent as most people today would believe (Spitzer, 2020). At the time, guns were expensive, most families did not own one, and they were primarily used by farmers to protect their livestock from predators as there were only small calibers that didn't have the ability to take down larger game. Also, rifles at the time all had to be muzzle loaded and could only fire 1 round of ammunition before necessitating reloading. Given these discoveries, it's easy to see how one could make the argument that since the guns have changed over time, so should the law. It is believed that the second amendment was written into law in the case that the government started to overrule the rights of the people. Many would argue that such an event is unlikely to happen in modern times for the US and should no longer be a factor in support of the 2nd amendment.

Additionally, it has been shown that when a gun owner attempts to use it to prevent a crime, the owner ends up being killed more often than the offender is killed (Jacobs 2020). This fact could negate all arguments that guns are used for protection since it would appear that more often than not it ends up escalating the situation and getting themselves killed rather than protecting themselves as they had hoped.

On top of this, Meszaros (2017) found that the decline of mental health care services has had a negative impact on the use of firearms as well as on the number of mass shootings. If gun control laws were able to isolate citizens with mental illnesses better, this would mean that they could have a significant impact in decreasing the number of such crimes. Laqueur and Wintemute (2019) attempted to do exactly that. They researched ways that had been developed to try and predict high risk individuals to develop policies that would prevent these individuals from purchasing a firearm. If these policies were implemented, it could potentially reduce the number of mass shootings by sick individuals dramatically.

OPPOSITION TO GUN CONTROL

If you simply look at facts like these, it's hard not to believe that the best solution is just to create more gun control policies. The problem with only looking at these types of statistics that show how many people are killed is that it doesn't tell you how these compare to crimes where a firearm wasn't used. For example, as Jacobs (2020) found, only about 7 percent of all violent crimes contained the use of a firearm. Less than a quarter of robberies and aggravated assaults had a firearm present as well.

Many anti-gun groups contribute the rise in mass shootings to the increased functionality of firearms to allow for capabilities such as semi-automatic firing. Dahmen (2018) would argue that a different reason for this increase could be the change in media coverage. With the advancement of technology, the scenes of mass shootings are recorded more and more. In a study they did, it was found that images of a shooter were shown almost 16 times more than images of victims. It is believed that this idolizes the shooter. Similar to how studies have shown that highly publicized suicides can lead to an increase in suicides, mass media coverage of a shooting can incentivize a shooter to try and "do better".

Numerous shooters have attributed their reasoning for committing such a heinous crime to the fact that they wanted to try and beat the record or murder more people than previous shooters had been able to. This should seem sick and twisted to most, and that's exactly what it is. A person willing to commit such a crime must have an inherently evil side to themselves. However, that doesn't mean we shouldn't take it into consideration. If publicizing events like these increases the likelihood for a shooter to be emboldened enough to commit this crime, shouldn't we at least ponder the idea of not doing so. The question is, would people be willing to give up the ability to receive information about such an event if it would help prevent them. Stroebe, Leander and Kruglanski (2017) found that 60 percent of gun owners claim protection and self-defense as a main reason for owning a gun. Jacobs (2020) would also argue that owning a gun is similar to life insurance. You don't have to use it in order to gain a sense of security. It is something that you would rather have and not need than need and not have. It gives owners a feeling of protection knowing that its there if they need it, but they hope they won't have to use it. I mentioned earlier that the offender kills the gun owner more often than the other way around. While true, this doesn't include all of the facts that put this statistic into the larger picture. Jacobs (2020) also reported that its 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. This number is drastically larger than the total number of crimes committed with the use of a firearm. The mere presence of a gun was enough of a threat to discourage the offender from continuing and decided instead to either surrender or flee.

This is why crimes of robbery committed by someone with a firearm have a much lower injury rate per crime. Its because the threat of a gun is more likely to discourage someone from

fighting back. If the offender only has a knife, a victim or bystander is more likely to stick up to them.

STATE AND FEDERAL GUN CONTROL LAW EFFECTS

There aren't a ton of restrictions when it comes to few federal laws related to gun control. These include age restrictions preventing minors from purchasing a firearm, basic background checks for firearms purchased through a licensed distributor, laws preventing former criminals from owning one, and limitations on what classes of weapons civilians can own such as making rocket launchers and explosive devices illegal for most anybody. Beyond this, most of the restrictions come from the state legislations.

There is a large debate about the effectiveness of gun control laws and whether they reduce the number of shootings as they are intended to do. According to Lott (1992), there is strong evidence that says 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. Since the laws of each state differ so much though, it becomes very hard to compare what laws work and what laws don't since it is impossible to isolate an individual law.

As Luca, Malhotra and Poliquin (2020) found, mass shootings have a significant impact on gun control laws, but not in the way you would expect. First of all, it depends on what political party is in power at the time of the mass shooting in the state that it occurred. If the state is held by the democratic party, there was no significant change in what laws were implemented in the aftermath of a mass shooting. However, it is a different story altogether if the state is held by the republican party. In this case, there is actually a significant increase in the number of laws

implemented that loosen regulations on gun restrictions. This may come as a surprise to many as one might expect tighter restrictions on guns after a mass shooting.

However, Perry (2013) would argue that this makes perfect sense. Historically, an increase in restrictions on gun laws does not tend to see a decrease in firearms owned by criminals. This could be contributed to the fact that most criminals acquire a firearm illegally. This can be seen in the case of the Sandy Hook incident. The shooter attempted to purchase a firearm first, but was denied due to a determination of being mentally unfit. However, they were still able to acquire a gun and commit a mass shooting.

Everything I have outlined above leads to 1 conclusion to the question I proposed to begin with. It's clear to see that there are strong arguments on both sides of this debate, all of which using factual evidence and statistics. That right there is the reason that neither side is willing to compromise. It all comes down to emotion. Both sides can cite statistics forever to make their case, but due to the intense emotions brought about by this topic, neither side is willing to compromise or hear what the other has to say. This is exactly what I would like to study in my method of research. This thesis aims to see how certain emotions affect one's inability to compromise on a topic even if it means that a solution could be found.

STS FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

For my study, I would first implement a survey to be sent to range of groups, ensuring that groups from both sides of the debate are represented. I aim to get information from people of all types of demographics to get their current opinion on gun control as this will get a better idea on what is inhibiting communication. The survey would include questions starting with where they currently reside in terms of this debate. Depending on which side of the debate they agree with, I would then ask them about their response to data and statistics that support the arguments

for the opposite side. In order to be able to see these responses, I would also conduct in-person interviews to see how they react by arguing the side opposite of them through questions and responses to their answers. I would like to have a sample size of at least 25 for the survey and conduct around 15 interviews as a good starting point. I would ensure that I ask a relatively equal number of people on either side of this debate. I would be able to combine my findings of these interviews to see participants willingness to continue to debate with me in a calm manner rather than escalating to an argument. There is clearly going to be biases when it comes to this topic. A hunter will obviously be more likely to prefer less gun control and someone who has been affected by a firearm incident is more likely to want more gun control. However, since I am trying to study the emotional effect these scenarios have on people's ability to compromise and discuss, this is not something I would try to prevent.

TIMELINE

During the course of the semester, I will first begin with a survey sent to as many people as I can on both sides of the discussion. This would give me predominately quantitative data on how many people agree and disagree on certain issues. From here, I can isolate the individuals that side strongly with one side or another compared to the ones that are pretty neutral. I can then interview the more strongly opinionated individuals to ask more in-depth questions about their feelings on certain issues. This would be more qualitative data coming from the observation of their emotional responses. Finally, I would like to have discussions between the two sides where I mostly observe the conversation but with topic starters to steer the conversation towards issues I need to hear about. I can combine this research to see if there is a correlation between how emotionally affected someone is on this issue compared to their willingness to compromise.

CONCLUSION

Due to the volatile situation America has found itself in with regards to gun control, I intend to discover what was holding us back from confronting this issue and coming up with a solution that appeases both sides of the argument. I will attempt to determine why we have been unable to have civil conversations amongst each other and turned that topic into such a polarized conversation. I expect that the main reasons of this would be that humans who are more emotionally invested are more likely to stick to their own opinion without listening to that of someone who disagrees with it. This research could give us insight in to how to better establish communications between the 2 opposing sides to eventually come to a suitable compromise.

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