

<http://somatosphere.net/2018/08/the-banality-of-lost-guns.html>

## The Banality of Lost Guns: Producing Null Data Sets

2018-08-21 12:08:53

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On the evening of June 6, 2016, a man with a concealed carry permit misplaced his loaded 9mm Kahr handgun in the middle of a park filled with kids during the opening night of my town's recreational soccer league.[1] A parent found the gun lying in the grass under a stand of pine trees a few yards from a playground teeming with kids. She immediately phoned the police, who arrived within minutes, unobtrusively parking their two cruisers along the park's entrance road before recovering the gun. Soon after, a stocky white man in a baseball cap, sunglasses, and shorts and tee shirt approached the officers, quietly talking to them while pointing to his empty pocket.

It took more than a week of repeated questions to the police for my husband and me, having watched this unfold, to get official confirmation that a weapon had even been involved. Once we did, it was only when the media responded to outraged parents that police told the public what had occurred—the man, at the park with his family for his kid's soccer game, had not noticed when the gun slipped out of his pocket as he sat in the grass. Officers, unaware that firearm possession was prohibited in town parks,[2] carried out a background check to confirm the man legally owned the weapon and then returned it to him the next day. After the public outcry, police request an expedited permit review in which a judge suspended the man's license, and he temporarily surrendered all 12 of his firearms pending a review of his county pistol permit. The town responded by putting up signs indicating that firearms are prohibited in town parks.

This particular incident from Brighton, a predominantly white, middle-class, self-described liberal suburb a mile outside of the city of Rochester in upstate New York, seems to be representative of a more generalizable phenomenon in the contemporary US. More recently, in April 2018, a homeless man found and fired a loaded gun left in a bathroom stall at a public beach in Florida.[3] In June 2018, a child found and fired a loaded gun left on a sofa in an Ikea in Indiana.[4] Given the new capacity for DIY gun-making now that blueprints for 3D guns will be legally available online, one might reasonably ask if these incidents will increase.[5]

Lost-gun incidents like these, in which no one is mortally injured, seem trivial compared to the gruesome spectacle of mass shootings to which we have become accustomed, and to the everyday gun violence facing residents of cities including Rochester.[6] That these incidents *become* stories points to the unequal distribution of vulnerability to gun violence, whether at the hands of citizens or police, shaped by race, gender, class, and spatial segregation. Like school shootings, lost guns in furniture stores, public bathrooms, or playgrounds puncture the veneer of “safety” in ostensibly secure spaces—where “secure” stands in for a particular form of middle-class, suburban, typically white-coding “community,” but one that is apparently, usually invisibly, saturated with guns. These incidents, as I suggest below, spotlight the quotidian logics that enable their occurrence: the powerful narrative of “good guys with guns,” the banality of guns, and the persistent location of guns in private (not public) realm, which together generate a null data set that tautologically reinforces these same narratives.

### **Good guys with guns**

In this incident on June 6, 2016—one year after the Charleston church mass shooting, a week before the Pulse nightclub mass shooting, and just a few weeks before a police officer shot and killed Philando Castile while he was reaching for his driver’s license after telling the office he had a legal handgun—the Brighton police gave an apparently white man back his loaded gun that he dropped in a park crowded with hundreds of kids (any of whom could have found it and operated it *as intended*, with deadly consequences), with no hassle, because he was, in their implicit view, a good guy with a gun.[7] This incident emphasizes both the power of the “good guy with a gun” narrative, and the whiteness inherent in it.[8]

When the man approached the police, officers focused their attention on whether the loaded gun was legally registered and permitted to him, *not* if the gun was legally allowed in the park (which it was not). Officers never laid hands on him, searched him, or detained him, nor even raised their voices. Police told us the incident did not meet their criteria for inclusion in the public blotter—they did not see him as a “suspicious person” or “concern to the community,” but as a soccer dad who had made a simple mistake, with no harm done.[9] The police chief emphasized that the man could have reasonably been unaware that firearms were prohibited in the park, because there were no signs[10]—despite common knowledge that ignorance of the law is not an excuse. Even the uncontested evidence—that the man had taken a gun to a firearm-prohibited area, that he had clearly failed to secure the weapon properly in his holster, or to notice when it fell out of his pocket, and thus, by definition, was not

behaving as a responsible gun owner—were not strong enough to shake the “good (white) guy with a gun” foundations animating the police response.

The deaths of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile and countless others amplified by #BlackLivesMatter suggest this incident would have unfolded differently if the man telling police he accidentally lost his loaded pistol had been anything other than a white soccer-dad, especially in this park one mile from the city limits in a highly-segregated region. What might it take to begin to chip away at this “good (white) guy with a gun” imaginary, which seems impervious in the face of mass shootings, let alone lost guns in playgrounds?

### **Banality of guns**

I spent an hour talking with the chief of police a week later, interested not, as he expected, in getting the police to file charges, but in examining the bureaucratic logics enabling this incident and the response to it: why his officers did not know the gun laws or transparently inform residents about this public safety concern. I explained that for eight days after the incident, I combed the police blotter, phoned the police records department repeatedly, and spoke in person with three officers, each time being told that there was no record of police being summoned to the park that day, and that therefore I must be mistaken. It was only after we went to the police station to file a Freedom of Information Law request that an officer confirmed what we had witnessed.[11]

The police chief’s response to this impenetrability was to first thank me for my “persistence,” saying that if I had not kept asking, he would not have been alerted about the incident. He quickly added that there was no deliberate obfuscation, but rather, a simple miscommunication: the problem was that I was asking about a gun in the park, while the incident was officially filed as “lost property”.[12] Setting aside both the chief’s astonishing admission that he did not have procedures in place ensuring his officers (not a media firestorm ignited by a “determined” citizen) would inform him when a loaded gun was found in a public park, as well as extensive evidence refuting his simple assertions of police accountability;[13] and resisting his placating move to interpellate me as the right kind of dutiful watch-dog citizen concerned about the safety of my own proverbial backyard—I focus here on the labelling of the loaded hand gun as *lost property* and the erasures this labelling enabled that both reflected and reproduced the *banality of guns*. [14]

In short: a loaded 9 mm Kahr pistol found unattended under a tree in a

park filled with children was bureaucratically filed as “lost property,” as if it were a cell phone, a wallet, or a set of car keys. This equivalency, I suggest, reflects and constitutes the banality of guns. In the stroke of a categorical sorting, a loaded pistol is neutralized, stripped of its exceptional status as weapon, with focus instead on its characterization primarily as being misplaced from its owner. Baffled by the chief’s answer, I asked, couldn’t the filing system be different? He assured me that his hands were tied by the state-mandated forms required for uniform incident processing.

Such formal, seemingly inevitable bureaucratic categorizations are not neutral, but amplify certain kinds of threats and obfuscate others, revealing the inconsistency of our nationwide hypervigilance about particular regimes of risk alongside our complacency around others. While the Brighton police blotter reified the “real” dangers—including “suspicious persons” preying on “the ladies who leave their purses on the passenger seat while their kids play soccer,”<sup>[15]</sup> the *actual loaded handgun* under the tree where dozens of preschoolers were playing was neutralized as merely “property.” Consider, by contrast, how an unattended duffel bag in an airport invites bomb-sniffing dogs, armed border security, and evacuation, and where tweezers, water bottles, and tubes of toothpaste are prohibited as potential weapons. Bureaucratically filing this loaded pistol as “lost property” also deflected attention from the “good guy with a gun,” refusing to name him as threat, in an inversion of the NRA’s mantra “guns don’t kill people, people do.”

I asked the police chief how it was possible that his officers did not know the town’s own laws. Not only had the officers who recovered the loaded handgun failed to know the town prohibitions, but a full week after the incident at least one police officer told us, incorrectly, that, “It’s not a crime” to have a gun in the park.<sup>[16]</sup> “There are so many statutes,” the police chief told me, “It’s difficult for officers to have them all memorized, especially when the Town Code is so unclearly written.”<sup>[17]</sup> This statement again rests on an equivalency between firearms and other benign, suburban nuisances. His officers could not possibly be expected to keep track of specifics of gun regulations, he seemed to suggest, amidst similar rules prohibiting so many other objects in parks, such as helium balloons, bounce-houses, or dog poop. How might it change our norms if officers understood gun statutes as something extraordinary, not mundane? What opportunities emerge when we render visible the effects of bureaucratic sorting, and interrupt their seeming inevitability?

## Technical solutions and private concerns

The power of the “good guy with a gun” narrative, in conjunction with the banality of guns, served to obscure other interpretations of and responses to the event. The official solution suggested the problem was the town’s fault, and one with a technical cause—lack of proper signage—not a deeper concern that, perhaps, people should not normalize taking a loaded gun to a soccer game, or that concealed carry brings risks of human error and horror.

But there are limits to the responsibility the town would take on. I asked a police officer—whom I met that same June week at a bike safety demonstration at our town farmer’s market, during which he instructed kids how to properly secure their helmets and to use hand signals while riding—whether the police could do similar clinics on safe handling of firearms. The officer immediately responded, “No, gun safety is a private family issue, not a public one.”[18] A school administrator confirmed the absence of any gun safety component in the early elementary health curriculum, telling me, “It is such a politically charged topic, one that many people are uncomfortable with, and perhaps one that we have stayed away from as public education because of sensitivity with parents and their feelings about sharing in their own way with their own children.”[19]

Even the evidence of a loaded pistol in a playground full of kids could not sway the entrenched distinction between some issues, such as car seat installation, fire precautions, and “good-touch/bad touch”, as *public* safety domains, versus others, like loaded guns, as *private* concerns only for parents and the home. The police chief did ultimately issue a press release indicating that, with the schools, “We are working on a gun safety program for our community,”[20] yet in the two years since, I have heard nothing further—suggesting the failure of the public domain safety logics to gain traction in the face of prevailing views that loaded guns, like religious beliefs, are sacred and outside the public domain.

What is at stake in our town’s decisions—widespread nationwide—that we cannot teach kindergarteners basic firearm safety (such as “Don’t touch, get an adult”), but we do teach them to huddle in cubbies to hide from mass shooters, in the four New York state-mandated “active shooter” drills each year? What are the implications of requiring the town to demarcate a gun *free* zone, as distinct from requiring designation of gun-*tolerant* zones? Gun-*free* zones are thus equivalent to *smoking* zones, and gun-saturated zones equivalent to no-smoking zones.[21] These solutions put the burden on towns to put up signs, and teachers and kids to hide in school closets—and, according to my 6-year-old, on kids to not wear light-up sneakers because “then you have to be really still during shooter drills, because if you wiggle, the shooter can see you”—not on gun owners to be responsible or limit where they carry, or on officers to know their laws and their racialized assumptions, or

on state agencies to responsibly keep statistics that might help us to better understand the real risks of our fascination with guns.

### **Conclusion: Production of the null set**

The confluence of logics above—the imaginary of the good guy with a gun, the bureaucratic banality of guns, and the firm notion that guns are private not public concerns, particularly in suburban and rural spaces—here had the effect of producing *non-knowledge*, a null data set. Filing such incidents as “lost property” (without being transparent about doing so) constitutes a sleight-of-hand that erases a set of possible data, amidst a nationwide debate on gun control. It eliminates empirical evidence about how often this type of event occurs, and thus reifies an existing notion of the “safety” of concealed carry through erasure of the thinkable category of “errors”.

This erasure is not neutral, but motivates a different set of policy decisions, normalizing incremental saturation of our towns and cities with guns. By way of example, moments after the police chief’s admission that he almost did not learn about this dropped gun, he earnestly assured me that he had never heard of anything like this happening in Brighton before—falsely conflating, it seemed, the absence of *data* about these events with the absence of *occurrence* of these events. He then explained that he had just testified in favor of arming campus safety before a newly-formed Security Commission at the University of Rochester, rattling off statistics of response times to active-shooters.[22] Four months later, University of Rochester’s president adopted the Commission’s recommendation to arm 42 campus “peace” officers with Glock 21 handguns, based on the Commission’s report that uncritically reinforced the “good guy with a gun” logic and, motivated primarily by the active-shooter frame, failed to consider empirical data about how and when adding guns *decreases* many dimensions of “public safety”.[23] The chief’s response, and the Security Commission report, not only failed to address my concerns about the *elimination of data* about the risks of introducing guns to an otherwise gun-free space, and my related questions about the unequal raced and gendered vulnerabilities to these armed officers,[24] but literally rendered them unthinkable.

Null data sets in American discourses about guns emerge in part from our narratives of the banality of guns, good guys with guns, and guns as private—and these lacunae then tautologically reinforce those narratives and the work they do to further normalize guns. Rather than dismissing lost-gun incidents as idiosyncratic to particular irresponsible individuals, or seeing them as non-stories because of the lack of spectacular violence,

rather, I suggest these incidents illuminate quotidian cultural logics buttressing American “gun-love”—a love that Dunbar-Ortiz argues has never been only narrowly about citizens’ rights in relation to the state, but which reflects a much deeper foundation of American settler colonialism, violence, and genocide.[25] Tracing, and beginning to unravel, the complex interconnections between guns and the wider workings of race, class, gender, power, and violence in America is perhaps a step towards rendering thinkable new paradigms.

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[1]I am indebted to participants in the Social Life of Guns Symposium at the University of Rochester in March 2018 for the opportunity to more fully analyze this ethnographic incident, to Kathryn Mariner for organizing it, and to Eugene Raikhel for the opportunity to write it up for *Somatosphere*.

[2]Brighton, NY Town Code Section 113-7 (5). Violations of the town code are punishable by a \$250 fine and 15 days in jail.

[3]<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/article208653029.html> This incident surreally involved a teacher from Marjorie Stoneham Douglas high school, site of the Parkland school shooting that galvanized national youth activism for gun control in February and March 2018.

[4]<https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/26/us/child-fires-gun-ikea-trnd/index.html>

[5]See Niklas Hultin on 3D gun printing: “On Gun Control as Social and Sensorial Practice,” Social Life of Guns Symposium, March 2018; [http://www.academia.edu/3160098/Guns\\_Anthropology\\_and\\_Cultural\\_Relativism](http://www.academia.edu/3160098/Guns_Anthropology_and_Cultural_Relativism).

[6]See John Klofas on the extent and nature of gun violence in Rochester, NY.

[7]See Angela Stroud, *Good Guys with Guns: The Appeal and*

*Consequences of Concealed Carry* (UNC Press, 2016); Jennifer Carlson, "Beyond Cold Dead Hands and Clenched Fists", *Jacobin*, May 11, 2018

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<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/05/national-rifle-association-gun-control-loesch>). For local analysis, see  
<https://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/local/columnists/andrea-atta/2016/06/14/andrea-atta-gun-buckland-park/85885824/>.

[8]See Caroline Light, "Guns were for white men," July 23, 2018, Public Books ( <http://www.publicbooks.org/guns-were-for-white-men/>); Chad Kautzer, "A Political Philosophy for Self Defense", February 1, 2018, Boston Review  
(  
<http://bostonreview.net/race/chad-kautzer-political-philosophy-self-defense>  
). For historical analyses of guns within African American communities, see, for example, Charles Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed* (Duke: 2015); Akinyele Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back* (NYU: 2013).

[9]Personal communication, Brighton police officer, Brighton police department, June 14, 2016.

[10]Personal communication, Brighton chief of police, Brighton police department, June 17, 2016.

[11]An officer told us that "if hypothetically it had happened" we would need to file a FOIL request to learn about it. Personal communication, Brighton police officer, June 14, 2016.

[12]Personal communication, Brighton chief of police, Brighton police department, June 17, 2016.

[13]See for example:  
<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/696-blacklivesmatter-anti-black-racism-police-violence-and-resistance>

[14]I am of course indebted to Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*(1963).

[15]Personal communication, Brighton police officer, Buckland Park, June 13, 2016.

[16]Personal communication, Brighton police officer, Buckland Park, June 13, 2016.



[17]Personal communication, Brighton chief of police, Brighton police department, June 17, 2016.

[18]Personal communication, Brighton police officer, Brighton police department, June 14, 2016.

[19]Personal email communication, school administration, Council Rock Elementary School, June 15, 2016.

[20]Press release, Chief Mark T. Henderson, Brighton Police Department, June 16, 2016.

[21]See Peter Benson on connections between tobacco and firearms, including "Smoking Guns: Obviousness and Tobacco-Causation in the Killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Sandra Bland," Social Life of Guns Symposium, March 2018, Rochester;  
<https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/plar.12071>.

[22]Personal communication, Brighton police chief, Brighton police department, June 17 ,2016.

[23]  
<https://www.rochester.edu/president/security-commission-report-response/>

[24]For raced vulnerabilities to armed campus security on college campuses, consider, for example, the campus-wide lockdown at Colgate University in May 2017 based on fears of a black student with a glue gun ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/05/02/a-black-student-a-glue-gun-and-a-lockdown-prompt-debate-over-race-at-colgate/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.21ccec45b66a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/05/02/a-black-student-a-glue-gun-and-a-lockdown-prompt-debate-over-race-at-colgate/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.21ccec45b66a)); a mom on a campus tour who called the police on two Native American teenagers at Colorado State University in May 2018 (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/04/us/colorado-state-university-racial-profiling-trnd/index.html>). See also shootings by campus police at University of Chicago in April 2018, and the fatal shooting by Portland State University officers in June 2018 (<https://www.npr.org/2018/07/03/625544279/portland-shooting-reignites-debate-over-armed-campus-police>).

[25]Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment* (City Light Books: 2018).

**AMA citation**

Doughty K. The Banality of Lost Guns: Producing Null Data Sets. *Somatosphere*. 2018. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/2018/08/the-banality-of-lost-guns.html>. Accessed August 22, 2018.

**APA citation**

Doughty, Kristin. (2018). *The Banality of Lost Guns: Producing Null Data Sets*. Retrieved August 22, 2018, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/2018/08/the-banality-of-lost-guns.html>

**Chicago citation**

Doughty, Kristin. 2018. The Banality of Lost Guns: Producing Null Data Sets. Somatosphere. <http://somatosphere.net/2018/08/the-banality-of-lost-guns.html> (accessed August 22, 2018).

**Harvard citation**

Doughty, K 2018, *The Banality of Lost Guns: Producing Null Data Sets*, Somatosphere. Retrieved August 22, 2018, from <<http://somatosphere.net/2018/08/the-banality-of-lost-guns.html>>

**MLA citation**

Doughty, Kristin. "The Banality of Lost Guns: Producing Null Data Sets." 21 Aug. 2018. Somatosphere. Accessed 22 Aug. 2018.<<http://somatosphere.net/2018/08/the-banality-of-lost-guns.html>>