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We Need to Talk About "Gun Violence": Reflections on Terminology and Contexts of Violence

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Among the many political challenges of our time, gun violence in America has emerged as one of the most divisive. A retreat into partisan communities prevents us from considering the complexity or lived experiences of our political opponents. The fears and insecurities of each group are projected onto the other. Both consume media that influences how they are likely to think about or experience gun-related violence in America. Whether or not a household contained firearms predicted which way it would vote in the 2016 presidential election more accurately than [any other demographic split](#).

In September, 2016 I began a period of ethnographic fieldwork with a gun rights activist community in San Diego. Over the course of a year, I found myself immersed in both liberal and conservative communities at a time of political turmoil, giving me a fascinating insight into how different political realities are constructed. The conventional ideological lines that are drawn around gun violence often prevent a more nuanced approach to the issue, but I have found conservatives and liberals alike desperate to tackle firearm related harm. However, identification with one's political group often sets the limits of how one can think and talk about solutions. As a result, I have often found myself succumbing to a sense of hopelessness at the rigidity of both sides of the debate.

Here I want to suggest that we might overcome this divide and improve the public conversation with a better understanding of what we mean when we use the term "gun violence". It is too often used as a catch-all for the diverse problems that arise from the presence of firearms in American society. As an anthropologist, I am suspicious of any universal category that takes for granted what it describes. Gun violence as an analytical category does not allow us to adequately distinguish between the most significant kinds of harm and the true reach of their social costs.

As anthropological approaches to violence show, physical harm is rarely devoid of social, historical, or cultural meaning. An approach that focuses on contexts that produce particular kinds of harm is in a better position to

understand these meanings and therefore to design solutions that work. Violence manifests itself in specific contexts impacting communities in unequal ways that demand complex social analyses. By defining this violence in relation to an object we imply that the eradication of that object would solve the deeper problems it hides: soaring rates of mental illness that have seen an accompanying rise in suicide, the violent qualities of masculinity that seem to be associated with the vast majority of gun violence, continuing institutionalised racism, and the kind of violence that overwhelmingly impacts women and the LGBTQ+ community.

This article is an attempt to show why it is important that we are more precise in our day-to-day discussions about gun-related violence. It is also a call for cautious optimism. Taken as a whole, gun violence rates have been declining steadily for decades ([notwithstanding a slight increase in 2015 and 2016](#)). However, this obscures the fact that suicides have increased, while gun related homicides have significantly declined. What is the reason for these different trends? Is it possible to identify particular kinds of gun-related harm and the contexts from which they emerge? Are there programmes and policies out there that have reduced violence?

I hope to answer these questions by looking at types of gun violence as they appear in the national context, but also through my own indirect experiences. The enthusiasm and thrill my informants had for shooting was infectious, sometimes giving me an insight into how people can become attached to their weapons. But in modern America, the next example of horrific gun violence is never far away and each local incident served to remind me of the real consequences of living around so many firearms. Although I never actually witnessed it first hand, my close encounters gave me a small taste of the lived fear of violence that so many experience daily. As I tried to understand these personal encounters, I came to the conclusion that gun violence is not one phenomenon and that we cannot afford to paint with broad brush strokes in seeking out solutions. Lives literally depend on it.

Suicide

As I got to know gun owners in San Diego, I began talking to a man who seemed enthusiastic about being involved in my research. After emailing back and forth, he suggested I come to his house for dinner the next week. However, in the intervening days I found out through a family member that he had taken his life with a personal firearm. Later in the year another informant's close friend did the same.

Suicide is more lethal than all other kinds of gun violence combined.

Roughly 50 people a day (that's 23,000 a year) [take their life with a gun](#), a body count comparable to the largest mass shooting in US history every day. Rates of suicide have slowly risen over the last decade while most other kinds of gun violence have declined. One study of California residents showed that legal gun owners were more than twice as likely to die by suicide than the [general population](#). This kind of gun violence disproportionately affects young people. It is in fact co-habiting adolescents, not gun owners, who are at the greatest [risk of suicide in a household that owns firearms](#). White Americans are also twice as likely to take their lives with a gun than [African Americans, Hispanics, or Asian Americans](#), and suicide rates are far higher in rural areas where gun ownership is most prevalent.

While the number of shootings carried out by people with serious mental illnesses represents just 1% of gun homicides, 90% of people who commit suicide have some [combination of mental health issues](#). Access to firearms is one dimension to consider when trying to reduce suicide rates, but the availability of mental health services and broader drivers of suicide like socio-economic disenfranchisement and loneliness have to be taken into account. This requires a far broader shift in national attitudes about the role of the government in providing care and treatment for those suffering from isolation, or under-employment. Eliminating guns cannot solve the problem of suicide, but tighter regulation and screening might reduce rates.

Mass Shootings

While I was in San Diego, a middle-aged white man shot eight African American residents of his apartment block while they attended a pool party, killing one and severely injuring several others. Reports said that it was only the proximity to a local hospital that saved them. This shooting occurred two blocks from my apartment. I could hear the sirens of the emergency services from my apartment and shivered at the thought of familiar streets echoing with gun shots. These tragedies often act as galvanising moments for awareness and activism on the issue of gun violence. For an example, one needs to look no further than the impressive March For Our Lives movement organised by survivors of the Parkland High School shooting in Florida.

Mass shootings can take anywhere between four and fifty-eight lives, yet they account for only a small proportion of gun related deaths. They are the most visible form of gun violence and their impact ripples throughout communities, cities, and the national consciousness. Because of a lack of consensus on what constitutes a mass shooting in terms of numbers it can

be difficult to assess whether these events are actually on the rise, or whether more frequent reporting has simply raised public awareness. Some studies suggest that they are becoming [more frequent and more deadly](#) – the record for the largest mass shooting of all time [has been broken three times in the last ten years](#).

Fortunately, mass shootings are still incredibly rare events – they account for around 3% of gun related homicides annually. The weapon of choice for this kind of violence is often the AR15 rifle, but [only 2% of firearm homicides are committed with such weapons](#). Because of their infrequency, it is very difficult to predict and prevent mass shootings. Better research is needed to understand the complex set of factors that can lead someone to attempt to take so many lives. It has been noted that shooters often draw on the techniques and [relate to previous mass killers](#). Behaviours that would not be possible without sensational coverage from a news media that aims to entertain and grab attention rather than inform.

Gender and Guns

The impact of gun violence also varies by gender. To take one example, mass shootings are almost exclusively carried out by men. This particular form of violence seems to emerge from some [qualities of masculinity taken to the extreme](#). Men perpetrate more than 90% of firearm homicides and are [also far more likely to be killed in them](#). However, there are 1.3 million incidents of intimate partner violence each year that overwhelmingly [impact women](#). The presence of a gun increases the likelihood that a woman will be [killed in a confrontation by five times](#).

Members of the LGBTQ+ community are also at a [greater general risk of violence](#) than the general population, but there is little research into how the presence of firearms impacts this. Beyond direct injury and death, there are also “symbolic” forms of violence – non-lethal threat, intimidation, and coercion in which [a gun is present but never fired](#). This kind of violence is much harder to account for in statistical analyses because it so often goes unreported.

Some state level policies that restrict access to firearms for perpetrators of intimate partner violence have been shown to [reduce the total number of deaths](#). One key requirement for success is the implementation of background checks for firearm purchases that takes into account comprehensive disqualifying information. Background checks represent a simple and popular policy that can make gun ownership safer by prohibiting dangerous individuals from purchasing firearms. [Surveys have shown that policies like this are supported by 84.3% of gun owners](#), but

some states have not implemented background check measures and there is still no federal system in place.

Gun Related Homicides

According to CDC data, the level of general crime in the United States is not any higher than comparable nations and [firearm homicides are at a thirty-year low](#). However, lethal violence is still roughly [five times higher in America](#) than economically analogous parts of the world. Many social scientists have claimed that this is because of a high [number of firearms in private hands](#), citing studies which show that the presence of a gun increases the likelihood that the victim of a home invasion will die by [three fold](#). However, there are many other factors to consider with gun homicides.

Globally unprecedented rates of incarceration in the United States are linked to the kinds of gun violence associated with gang conflict which disproportionately impacts ethnic minority communities. The revolving door of courts and drug prohibition policies combine to produce a system (and images) reminiscent of the antebellum south. This raises the spectre of state enforced gun violence. As with mass shootings, the footage of police officers shooting African-Americans provokes public outcry ending in a similar stalemate of media punditry and political inaction.

The gun owners I knew often reminded me that the police shoot more white people annually, but this is simply because the majority of the US population belongs to this demographic. In 2016, black men between 15 and 35 were still nine times more likely than any other group to be killed [by law enforcement officers](#). The police brutality that many African Americans face is reinforced by a judicial system that has been shown to convict black Americans more often [than white Americans for the same crimes](#).

Despite historic lows, the death and injury that results from gang related conflict requires tailored responses. [Programmes like Cure Violence](#) have reduced gun homicides by up to 73% in Chicago neighbourhoods by applying the techniques of epidemiology to the spread of violence. The organization trains ex-gang members in conflict mediation and leadership as they return to the community after prison time. These local figureheads then interrupt cycles of violence that would otherwise spiral out of control. Cure Violence has expanded its operations successfully to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. However, to tackle state enforced violence, many social scientists have suggested that larger reforms of the [prison system are needed](#), as well as a [shift away from militarised policing that targets minority communities](#).

Accidental Deaths

While in San Diego, I accompanied a number of gun owners to a regular sports shooting match in the desert. One week I arrived to find the dusty range busier than usual. I asked someone I knew why the sport had suddenly gained such popularity. He replied that a man had died at a similar match north of here after someone accidentally shot him while competing. The range immediately closed but, undeterred by the fatality, many of the stray sports shooters had joined our match.

Accidental deaths like this have declined by 48% since 1999 and today [they account for around 700 fatalities each year](#). This drop is attributed to a number of educational gun safety programmes, but also to regulation of firearm storage practices at the state level and a slight decline in the number of houses that own a gun. Advice about safe storage and gun safety training was available at all of the shooting ranges I visited in San Diego. The gun rights activist organisation I spent time with also encouraged thorough training and safety measures in the home.

In California, one recent initiative encourages parents to ask whether a household owns firearms and that they are stored safely before allowing their children to accept invitations from friends. While awkward, this can prevent accidents where children find poorly stored weapons, using them without realising they are loaded. In the United States it is still more likely that you [will be killed by a toddler than a terrorist](#).

Contextualising the Problem

Each of these different types of gun violence emanates from a unique set of circumstances. They are influenced by historical and contemporary gender relations, institutionalised racism, socio-economic inequality, a lack of funding for the treatment of mental illness, and the absence of federal consensus on policies that reduce access to weapons for dangerous individuals. Gun-shot wounds cost the US tax payer [\\$6.6 billion annually](#) in emergency treatment for uninsured victims – so gun violence is also an economic issue that puts a strain on the American healthcare system. It makes good fiscal sense to channel money and effort into the kinds of programmes that are working. Funding is needed for research that helps to understand and prevent firearm related harm to save on long term costs. The ban on federal support for research into gun violence by agencies [like the CDC has to be lifted](#).

As a whole, gun violence rates have fallen steadily over the last 20 years, but breaking the statistic down into parts suggests that gun violence is a problem that reaches far beyond the firearm. This is not cause for defeatism, instead it is a call for the hard work necessary in understanding the complexity of the issue. The skill set of the qualitative researcher is well suited to exploring the contexts from which violence emerges. In-depth interviewing, ethnographic methodologies of participation, and living among affected communities allow a researcher to dig deep into each kind of gun violence and to understand those Americans who live around firearms on a daily basis ([as I tried to do in a 2017 article](#)). We need to be specific when we talk to each other about this issue, or teach about it in schools and universities. A closer look at how each kind of violence manifests itself in American communities can tell us exactly what the problems are and how to design effective solutions.

Gun violence as a single category can be a useful rallying cry for direct action. Since the Parkland High School shooting the national debate on gun ownership and violence has reached an unprecedented point culminating in mass protests around the world. Students who survived the shooting have taken on the burden of speaking to politicians and the media about their experiences, upsetting the business-as-usual approach in which initial blanket coverage is followed by fading interest from the media, politicians, and the public. Instead of allowing this momentum to pass us by, let's use it as an opportunity to elevate the terms of the debate, bringing evidence-based solutions to the table in a way that reaches across political divides.

[Joe Anderson](#) is a social anthropology Ph.D. candidate at the University of Edinburgh. He is currently writing his doctoral thesis based on fieldwork with a gun rights activist community in San Diego, California. Joe spent time with two advocacy groups, one made up of predominantly male gun owners from middle to upper socioeconomic backgrounds, the second was a pro-LGBTQ+ firearms training group. His thesis focuses on the way gendered bodies and notions of self-defence are linked through gun use in a way that produces connections to a local community and the nation.

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