

Gun Violence in the United States

Written by Natalie Jester

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NATALIE JESTER, DEC 2 2023

This case study is an excerpt from McGlinchey, Stephen. 2022. *Foundations of International Relations* (London: Bloomsbury).

On the morning of 14 December 2012, Adam Lanza shot and killed his mother Nancy, a teacher, before packing an assault rifle, two handguns and a shotgun, and driving to Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown Connecticut. Lanza shot his way into the school and killed 20 children and six adults, before turning the gun on himself. This was not the first mass shooting to happen in the United States, but its victims are, so far, among the youngest. In total, fewer than 4000 people have been killed across all recorded terrorist incidents in the United States. In comparison, there are tens of thousands of deaths as a result of shootings each *year*, even including children as the example above shows. A statistic like this raises the question as to why terrorism is one of the most hotly contested security issues in the United States and often dominates political debates, yet it kills far fewer people than gun violence. When we grapple with this question, we can ask whether American gun laws and controls should then be considered a security issue, given that guns kill more people than terrorists.

Rather than dwell on the domestic side of this issue, something within the remit of the American legal and political systems, we can look to International Relations for some answers and analysis. For example, applying the Responsibility to Protect, the United States has arguably failed to take responsibility for widespread suffering and loss of life (pillar 1) and has not protected its citizens (pillar 3). This means that, if we read the Responsibility to Protect literally and seek to apply it evenly, the international community might be in a position to intervene in the United States.

However unlikely it is that another state would bring such an issue to the United Nations, adopting a human security framework does suggest that their endemic gun violence is a security problem. In order to break this issue down, gun violence in the United States occurs within several domains of human security. Under human security definitions, perhaps most obviously, guns pose a threat to personal security which emphasises bodily threats. We might argue that gun violence comes under the concern for children, based upon their vulnerability, as so many incidences occur in schools. Moving beyond schools, in situations of domestic violence, women are more likely to be killed by a gun than by any other method, and gun ownership increases the likelihood of murder in this situation. In many cases, the men who obtained these guns did so legally, which raises questions as to whether existing American law is sufficient to ensure human protection.

Human security also contains a provision for the security of the community. Outside of the school context, threats to community also include the disproportionate harm caused to Black people by police shootings. In 2014, for example, a 12-year-old Black boy named Tamir Rice was killed by police in a playground. At this time, Rice was holding a toy gun; he was shot by police as soon as they exited their vehicle, with no time taken to obtain further information. Ohio, the state in which Rice was killed, is an open-carry state in which citizens are permitted to have guns on display in public.

From 2013, the US has seen widespread protests and demonstrations under the Black Lives Matter banner which seeks to raise awareness of the extent of police killings of Black citizens – as first explored in chapter three. Here, the state is seen to be responsible for harm to its people due to the acceptability of guns as law enforcement tool and

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how this escalates all police encounters. This disproportionately impacts some communities who often fall under unequal suspicion, or profiling, and thus have a higher level of encounters with police. When adding the undercurrents of racism often evident in policing and justice in the United States, the precarious nature of life for some groups within American society certainly reaches territory marked out by human security debates.

The examples above help us think about how it is that some issues have historically been perceived as security problems while others have not. For example, why is it common to perceive as a greater problem tanks crossing borders than large-scale loss of life due to guns in the United States, especially amongst schoolchildren and Black civilians? After yet another school shooting in 2018, Wayne Lapierre, head of the powerful lobbying group the National Rifle Association (NRA), addressed the calls for gun regulation and said,

they care more about control, and more of it. Their goal is to eliminate the second amendment and our firearms freedoms so they can eradicate all individual freedoms ... They hate the NRA, they hate the second amendment, they hate individual freedom.

Lapierre is not the first to represent attempts to restrict the sale of guns as an assault upon freedom and he will likely will not be the last. Helping to unpack this, constructivists argue that interpretation is what really matters when we are thinking about security because this shapes what we decide to do about problems that arise. Two constructivist concepts are useful here: articulation and interpellation (Weldes 1996). Articulation is the process through which ideas about different subjects (like 'the NRA' or 'Americans'), objects, and ideas are linked together. In this case, the concepts of freedom and gun ownership are linked together. Interpellation is the way in which people are 'called into' particular identities. Here, this is accomplished through Lapierre's use of the term 'our', which assumes that there is an 'us' of some kind. Insights such as these help to open up the theoretical space for a more nuanced debate on the issue.

About the author:

Natalie Jester (she/her) is a lecturer at the University of Gloucestershire, UK. Her research focuses on the relationship between identity and security in digital spaces. Common themes include gender, state identity, violence and the everyday. Her research interests are reflected in her teaching, which covers a range of modules related to international issues, identity, and digital methods.