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Tread Lightly

Lydia Engel

Layout by Olivia Andrews. Photograph by Andrew Neel:
<https://unsplash.com/photos/4G5YhKG2Qks>.

In the fall of 2008, I went out hunting with my dad for the first time. My older sister and I had begged him to let us tag along, and he obliged, wrapping us in layers upon layers of warm clothes and giving each of us a camo jacket. Before the sun had come up, we were loaded into the family minivan and headed towards the swamp, where we met some of his hunting buddies. A lot of these guys were old-timers. Bob and his wife, Cathy, ate wild game almost exclu-

sively. Surrounding this group was a culture of sharing the wealth. If one person was able to kill three geese, and someone else none, the person with geese would always share with those without. Hunting was about going into the woods to enjoy nature, and only killing to eat.

We walked about a quarter of a mile to “the spot,” and I watched my dad and his friends each load three bullets into their rifles. Someone told me, “You can only have

three when hunting fowl because they don't want people shooting randomly into the flock. That would hurt a whole bunch of them and is the last thing we'd want." I nodded to show that I understood despite being too young to carry a gun myself and plodded over to the bucket that had been turned upside down for me to use as a chair. Sitting quietly, shaking from the cold, I sipped my hot cocoa and waited for the game to come. This particular morning, we were lucky. A large flock of geese in a characteristic "V" appeared overhead. With just a few shots, we had reached the daily limit, and I would soon be eating my favorite "goose-jerky."

In July, 2012, the summer after sixth grade, I took my hunter safety course while at NYS DEC summer camp. Before arriving, I had to complete an online segment on gun safety. At the camp, I was subject to another whole day of instruction and demonstrations.

"Always assume a gun is loaded," we were told, "and never point a gun at a person, never point a gun at what you think might be a deer, and if you're not certain, don't

shoot." This wasn't anything I hadn't heard before. A hunting safety instructor himself, my dad always stressed this to us, and my sisters and I were even discouraged from pointing toy and imaginary guns at each other. I knew they were dangerous.

That September, for my 12th birthday, I got my lifetime hunting license. It's now even notated on my New York State driver's license.

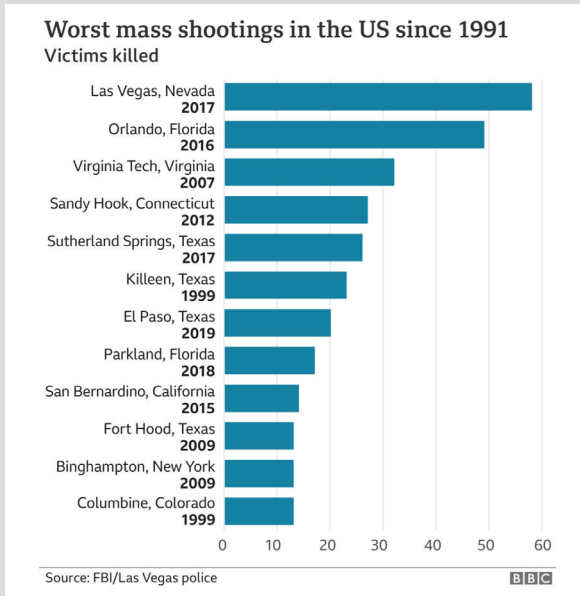
Then, on March 14, 2013, the same school year as the Sandy Hook school shooting, there was a mass shooting in my small town of 2,675 people, two blocks from the school. It started just a few houses down from my childhood home. Me and my fellow seventh graders were afraid. The teachers were instructed not to give us any information about what was going on, but we had learned enough from parents who had been able to reach us via text. While stuck in third period for an indeterminate amount of time, we felt safer than we should have. We didn't go home until late that evening, when the shooter had been cornered in an abandoned building one town over.

America's Gun Problem

Repeated mass shootings, specifically school shootings, are a problem unique to America. From 2009-2019, there were 180 school shootings in the United States (CNN). The highest profile incidences tend to be white suburban schools, but the majority of instances occur in schools that predominately serve people of color.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there were nearly 40,000 firearm related deaths in 2018, over 100 a day. 60% of these deaths were suicides, and more than 30% were homicides. Gun violence affects all age groups and is in the top-five leading causes of death for individuals from ages 1-64 in the U.S.

Consider the graph (opposite page) that shows the worst mass shootings in the U.S. since 1991 (BBC):



Just two weeks earlier, I had begged my father to take me to the Anti-NY SAFE Act protest in Albany. I was one in over 5,000 people who showed up at the NYS Capitol building on February 28, 2013. The original version of the NY SAFE Act included a ban on the future production of any firearm the state classified as an “assault weapon”; mandatory registration of all assault weapons and background checks for all firearm sales (with the exceptions of a spouse

or child); and a maximum of seven bullets loaded into a magazine. At the time, I was too young to understand the details, but I knew people were angry and that I should be, too. My dad was a lifelong member of the NRA, and he was the kindest person I knew. Why would they make his life more difficult when he had never done anything wrong? When he had gone above and beyond to make sure he did things right?

The NY SAFE Act notably impacted gun-manufacturers and sellers through its descriptions and outlawing of certain firearm features. The town adjacent to the one I grew up in housed both the high school I attended and the original Remington Arms Factory. Everyone knew someone who worked for Remington. The weapon used in Sandy Hook was made there and could’ve easily passed through the hands of a classmate’s parent. A little over a year after the act was originally passed, Remington Arms built a second plant in Alabama and moved two production lines from Ilion, NY, to Huntsville, AL, including the now illegal to manufacture in NY, Bushmaster. About 80 people lost their jobs that year, at least two of which were family friends. In late October 2020, the entire company went bankrupt, and 585 employees of the Ilion plant were laid-off with no severance.

The Hand-Gun Process

Handguns account for the majority of gun-related deaths, so it is logical that there would be more restrictions on handgun possession than long-guns.

In New York, the process to gain approval to purchase or own a handgun can take up to six months, and over \$100, depending on the county.

In Herkimer County, it costs \$152 to meet all application requirements before purchasing the firearm. The median household income is \$28,005. For someone who works 40 hours a week, it would take about a day and half to produce the money. That is, of course, without devoting any of those funds to housing, medical expenses, groceries, etc.

So, don't buy a handgun if it's such a hassle? In my town of Mohawk, NY, there are five full time police officers, including the police chief. Typically, one officer is on duty at a time. It's also a very rural area, so lots of people live relatively far away from the police station.

What Now?

More standardized gun control is inevitable, and not everyone is going to be happy about it. However, there are certain regulations and restrictions that have been shown to be effective in preventing gun-related deaths, and could readily be altered to reflect nuances in gun-culture identity.

Limit Legality of Assault Weapons

Though a popular platform for many gun-control advocates, some research has shown that intense restrictions and bans on assault weapons actually increase firearm related deaths. However, there are few to no practical, legal, civilian uses for most firearms deemed assault-weapons.

Mental Health Blocks

Mental Health blocks are very logical on paper. Most gun-related deaths are suicides, and many of the high-profile mass-shootings have been committed by individuals deemed mentally unstable. That said, the nuance here is in individuals' fear of guns being denied to or taken from them if they admit or acknowledge experiencing a depressive episode. This could make people less likely to seek professional help.

Micro-Stamping & Ballistic Fingerprinting

Microstamping is the practice of modifying firearms, so every cartridge dispelled is marked with a unique and microscopic serial number or code by

the gun's firing pin. Each gun's number would be logged in a database before leaving the factory, allowing law enforcement to simply look up the firearm used in a crime.

Bindu Kalesan's research found that legislation requiring such microstamping to be potentially effective in reducing deaths by firearm nationally (see Chedekel).

Safety Courses

Safety courses and tests correlate with reduced firearm related deaths. In NYS, there are mandatory safety courses to obtain a handgun permit and to obtain a hunting license. Yet, there is no safety course to simply purchase a long-gun. This is clearly a bit of a paradox. Additionally, there is a cost associated with these safety courses, decreasing accessibility to economically disadvantaged citizens.

10 Bullet Magazine & Restrictions on Modifications

Restricting magazine capacity to 10 bullets is a fairly noncontroversial change. My own grandmother, an avid Trump supporter, known to keep a loaded handgun in her bedside table has said "If you need more than 10 bullets at a time, then what you're doing isn't hunting." In NY, there are already hunting-specific restrictions, that are frequently less than 10 bullets. However, there doesn't seem to be a strong correlation between magazine capacity and number of firearms related deaths.

Government Subsidized Background Checks

Background Checks are logical. Universal background checks have actually been shown by the research of Kalesan and colleagues to be the most effective legislation in terms of significantly reducing the number of gun-related deaths. Performing background checks prior to ammunition purchases as well has proven relatively effective.

Law-abiding citizens should have nothing to worry about. The issue at hand, is really the fees associated with background checks. Universal background checks, like the ones mandated by the NY SAFE Act, are necessary for private sales as well. However, 3rd parties may decline to conduct the check at all, and if they do perform checks for private sales, may charge up to \$10.

One common complaint is the requirement for background checks for transfers between family members and close friends. Even a transfer between siblings is subject to a background check.

Red Flag Laws

Red Flag Laws allow individuals to temporarily prevent people from obtaining a firearm due to concerns that the person may be dangerous to themselves or others. While this could cause tension, it could also prevent serious tragedy.

Engel: Tread Lightly

In high school, I became friends with a boy (I'll call him Matt). We bonded talking about the outdoors. He's currently in school to become an environmental engineer. But, I slowly realized we had different ideas about hunting, and the purpose of guns. He didn't see them as a tool; he saw them as a toy, showing them off on social media, buying big guns just for the fun of shooting them. I'm not afraid of him owning weapons like those, but I personally can't understand why he wants them. To feel cool?

I've seen firsthand the effectiveness of standard firearms that aren't classified as "assault weapons" in essentially every legal use of them. The only argument for legality of "assault weapons" is principal. AR-15s and AR-15 style guns are admittedly a popular choice for hunting, but they're not a make-or-break piece of equipment.

I'm not afraid of guns, I'm scared of being shot. Growing up in a family that taught a healthy respect for the terrifying capabilities of firearms, I'm not afraid of holding one, I'm not afraid of seeing one, I'm not afraid of a stray bullet, but I'm terrified whenever I'm at a large public event. I'll be sitting in church and double checking my "escape routes," verifying that one of the parishioners I know to regularly carry is in church that Sunday to ease my nerves.

While at my younger sister's choir concert last year, I found myself looking around and imagining an active shooter situation. How I would push my other sister to the floor, behind and underneath the auditorium chairs. Easter, this year, at the annual sunrise service in the historic Ft. Herkimer Church, I heard loud movement in the back, from the front pew, where I was seated with my family. I knew it was probably just someone who had slept through their first alarm, but the panic was still there. What if?

I, like most others, would like to live in a world where those intrusive thoughts don't disrupt my little sisters' concerts, and don't immobilize me in the middle of church on Sundays. Unlike many others, I don't think I have an answer. Something is clearly very wrong with the way guns are handled in America, but not with how those I am surrounded by handle them. Gun legislation affects individuals and communities in much more complicated ways than we typically acknowledge, and those nuances need to be more carefully studied and addressed before gun-control legislation will be as widely accepted as it should be.

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