

# Three more dead in California: why the US political system is to blame

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On April 10<sup>th</sup> the city of San Bernadino in California entered headlines for gun violence once again as a man shot his wife, who was a teacher at a school; and one of her students, before shooting himself.

**Sierra Smucker** argues that this is part of a much wider trend of intimate partner homicides, caused by the country's grip on the Second Amendment and lax gun laws across states.



On April 10<sup>th</sup>, a man took a handgun to North Park Elementary School in San Bernardino. He told the school's front office he had to drop something off with his wife, a teacher at the school. Instead, he opened fire on his wife, striking two students in his efforts to kill her. He then turned the gun on himself.

While this incident has received widespread [media attention](#), many women murdered by their male partner receive little public notice. If they did, we would hear about it every day: every [16 hours](#) a woman is killed by her current or former partner in the United States. Firearms are the weapon of choice for most intimate partner homicides. Women living with a gun in the home are nearly [three times as likely](#) to be murdered than women with no gun in the home. The United States accounts for [84 percent of all female firearm victims](#) in the developed world even though the USA only represents a third of the population – a statistic that likely reflects the ease at which abusers can gain access to guns in the country.

But advocates for domestic violence survivors and gun violence prevention are fighting to change these statistics. Today groups like Everytown for Gun Safety and Americans for Responsible Solutions have pushed domestic violence (DV) to the top of their state policy agenda — and the pressure appears to be working. From 2013 to 2015, state legislators passed [twenty-eight policies](#) that aimed to protect survivors of domestic violence from abusers with armed with guns. Incredibly, the states that passed new DV and firearms policies included pro-gun states like Louisiana, South Carolina, and Alabama.

Activists have celebrated the success of these policies but the recent murder-suicide in San Bernardino highlights the work that remains. California, unlike Louisiana and South Carolina, has a history of passing strong gun regulations including policies related to domestic violence and firearms. [The Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence](#) gave California an A for regulation in 2016 (the only state to receive the top grade). Given this high rating and support for gun regulation in the Golden State, the fact that a man who should have been denied a firearm used one to commit murder is, if possible, more unsettling.

While we do not know, yet, how this man obtained his weapon, we do know that state policies at the intersection of domestic violence and firearms are difficult to implement. Research suggests that [irregularities in implementation](#) have undermined the effectiveness of these laws. Variation in state policies related to domestic abusers and firearms is a key issue. Not all states [ban domestic abusers](#) from obtaining firearms and porous borders undermine states' ability to enforce a firearm ban. For instance, a man convicted of domestic abuse cannot purchase a firearm in California but he can buy one in Arizona. He would only need to drive across the border, obtain a gun, come back, and commit the murder he planned.

If variation across states undermines the effective implementation of domestic violence and firearms policies, why aren't advocates like Everytown and Americans for Responsible Solutions focusing on federal policy change? A nationwide policy that streamlines implementation across all 50 states would surely be the most effective strategy to combat gun violence. Most developed countries have gun regulations that span the entire country. As women in the United States are [16 times](#) more likely to die from a gunshot than other similar countries, perhaps we should

consider following their lead.

But good policy does not always make for good politics in the United States – and this was intentional. The American political system was built on distrust of centralized power. The Founding Fathers envisioned states unified by a common currency and mutual interest in security but with local policy decisions made by local law makers. As a consequence, the US consists of essentially fifty different countries united under the banner of the United States.

Within this system, policy change at the federal level (which would impact *all* the states) is exceptionally difficult, containing multiple veto points and a series of checks and balances across the three branches of Government. Those in favor of federal change must hold together coalitions of advocates to press for policy change, gaining the support of all three branches (usually) to get their policy passed. Dissenters have a variety of options to successfully doom the legislation: delaying, developing alternative narratives, and capitalizing on citizens' natural resistance to the unknown impact of policy change. Because the right to firearms in the United States has developed as the norm, restricting gun access depends on advocates' ability to [change federal policy](#).

Gun violence prevention advocates have learned this lesson the hard way as choke points in federal policy making have [compromised their ability to change federal policy](#). A recent example of the federal intransigence on firearm regulation is the lack of policy change after the devastating mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012. Despite exceptionally high public support, grass roots organizing in favor of policy change, and an emotional speech from then President Obama, federal lawmakers [failed to pass any new regulations](#).

While a national policy for gun violence prevention would best address the problem of gun violence in the United States, advocates have committed to a state by state strategy, incrementally changing laws on the ground. But, while much slower, this strategy may make long term goals achievable. One proven way to gain access to the federal policy agenda is to build momentum for a change at the [state level](#). Advocates for [marriage equality](#) used a similar strategy and ultimately secured the universal right for all citizens to marry.

With the passage of policy at the intersection of domestic violence and firearms gaining traction even in pro-gun states, we may see a push for federal policy change in the coming years and see a victory for gun violence prevention groups. Unfortunately, many more will likely lose their lives before this happens.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

### **Sierra Smucker – Duke University**

Sierra Smucker is a PhD student at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, and a former Visiting Research Student the LSE US Centre. Her research, work, and teaching explore the ways in which less-advantaged groups gain access to political power and influence in important policy debates. Focusing on the role of social movements and the political feedback effects of policy making, Smucker looks at the politics of the policy process and how the state can influence who has access to power. She has particular expertise in the politics of gun reform in the United States and policy addressing violence against women.



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