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Updated Evidence and Policy Developments on Reducing Gun Violence in America

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Personalized Guns Progress Report

Stephen P. Teret

A personalized gun is one that, by design integral to the gun itself as opposed to an external locking device, can be fired only by the authorized user or users. If all newly manufactured guns were personalized guns, there would be a meaningful reduction in gun deaths. Considerable progress has been made on the personalized gun issue since mid-January 2013. What follows are brief mentions of the most important aspects of that progress.

Policy Advancements

Legislation relevant to personalized guns involves mainly, but not exclusively, the issue of whether to mandate that all new handguns be made so that they are personalized (or smart, childproof, owner-authorized, or user-authorized, all being synonymous). In the past year, there has been action at both the state and federal levels. On the federal level, Rep. John Tierney (D-MA) introduced a bill that would require all new handguns to be made owner-authorized and existing handguns to be retrofitted with smart technology. (The bill, H.R. 2005, can be accessed at <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/hr2005>.)

California State Senator Mark DeSaulnier introduced in the California legislature SB-293, regarding owner-authorized guns. This bill, in amended form, passed both the senate and the assembly, but it has not yet been sent to the governor. (The bill can be accessed at http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201320140SB293.) It would require all new handguns sold in California to be made owner-authorized or personalized.

Another topic for legislation at the federal level is amending the Protection in Lawful Commerce in Arms Act (PLCAA), enacted into law in 2005. PLCAA granted gun manufacturers broad immunity from liability. This is relevant to the personalized gun issue in that litigation for failure to make a gun as safe as feasible can be an effective tool in getting manufacturers to utilize already existing technology. A bill was filed by Congressman Adam Schiff (D-CA) to amend PLCAA to allow for some lawsuits based on gun industry misconduct.

Technology Advancements

When President Barack Obama issued his 23 executive orders on January 26, 2013, one of the orders was to the Justice Department to explore the potential uses of gun technology as a means of reducing gun violence. Attorney General Eric Holder then commissioned the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) to investigate existing and future personalization technologies. A meeting hosted by NIJ took place in March 2013 and was attended by Attorney General Holder and his staff, members of other government agencies, gun manufacturers, inventors, and public health scholars. In the months that followed the meeting, the staff of NIJ explored in greater depth the details of existing and proposed technologies. On June 17, 2013, NIJ issued its report, entitled *A Review of Gun Safety Technologies* (which is available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/242500.pdf>). The report found that “personalized firearms are not currently commercially available in the United States, but that at least three products—two handguns and a shotgun—are at a technology maturity level that could at least be described as commercializable or pre-production. The manufacturers of the two handguns say they are planning to bring their products to market in 2013.” This NIJ report is of great importance in that it rebuts the longstanding claim made by many who are opposed to personalized guns that the technology is infeasible.

Scholarly Advancements

One of President Obama's executive orders issued in January 2013 was for the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to resume funding of gun violence prevention research. The CDC had discontinued such funding many years ago when it felt pressure from Congress, based upon the political influence of the NRA. As a result of the executive order, the CDC asked the Institute of Medicine (IOM), which is part of the National Academies of Science, to convene a meeting to discuss research priorities. One of the sessions of this meeting focused on personalized guns. IOM then issued a formal report on June 5, 2013 (which can be accessed at <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2013/Priorities-for-Research-to-Reduce-the-Threat-of-Firearm-Related-Violence.aspx>). The IOM recommendations to the CDC as to what research should be funded include personalized gun technology.

A conference was held in Berlin, Germany, in mid-June 2013 at the offices of the German Foreign Ministry. It was attended by policy makers from Europe and elsewhere, gun manufacturers, inventors, and academics. Among the gun makers attending the conference were the principals of the Armatix Corporation in Germany and TriggerSmart in Ireland. These are the two leading companies recognized in the previously mentioned NIJ report as leading the development of personalized guns. The conference dealt, in part, with personalized guns. (A chapter on this topic, written for the conference, can be accessed at <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/L-External-publications/2013/SAS-2013-Personalized-Firearms-Perspectives-Conference-Paper.pdf>.)

More than a decade ago, New Jersey passed a law that would require all new handguns sold in New Jersey to be childproof, as defined in the law, three years after the first childproof gun is offered for retail sale. Armatix now has plans to sell guns soon in the United States that will meet New Jersey's definition of a childproof gun, which will activate the three-year clock of the New Jersey law.

Social Advancements

Several venture capitalists who have designated themselves as the Sandy Hook Initiative have created a contest for additional technological advances for personalized guns, offering a prize of \$1 million. Further information on this contest is available at <http://www.smarttechfoundation.org/>.

Media Attention

A great deal of attention to personalized guns has appeared in the print media over the past year. With regard to electronic media, the *PBS NewsHour* did a lengthy piece on personalized guns that focused on both technology and policy.