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Updated Evidence and Policy Developments on Reducing Gun Violence in America

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Public Opinion on Gun Policy Following the Newtown Mass Shooting and the Disconnect with Political Action

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The December 14, 2012, shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary school prompted a national dialogue about the causes of, and solutions to, gun violence. The weeks and months following the shooting were a rare window of opportunity for policy makers to garner the public support and political will needed to strengthen gun laws in the United States, and during this period state and federal law makers introduced numerous gun violence prevention policy proposals. During the month following the Newtown shooting (January 2–14), we conducted a national public opinion survey to gauge Americans' support for many of the gun policies introduced by legislators across the country ($N=2,703$). We found that large majorities of Americans—including gun owners and Republicans—supported a wide range of gun policies, including policies to enhance the background check system for gun sales, to prohibit certain dangerous persons (e.g., those convicted of a serious juvenile crime) from having guns, to institute greater oversight of gun dealers, and to prevent people with mental illness from having guns.¹ This public opinion study used more rigorous methods than are typically employed in polls, including surveying large national samples of gun owners and non-gun owners living in

homes with guns to allow for more precise estimates of policy support overall and within key subgroups.

In spite of widespread public support for strengthening gun violence prevention policies, the U.S. Congress failed to pass any federal gun policy legislation. Perhaps most notably, Congress failed to pass legislation to strengthen the background check system for gun sales. This despite the fact that violence prevention research suggests that a strong background check system is necessary to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people, and we found that the majority (89%) of the American public—including Republicans (86%), gun owners (84%), and members of the National Rifle Association (NRA) (74%)—supported requiring background checks for all gun sales.¹

Why, in spite of widespread public support, did federal gun violence prevention policies proposed in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting fail to become law? The structure of the U.S. government is one contributing factor. First, all states, regardless of population size, are equally represented by two senators; so, senators from rural states with small populations and high rates of gun ownership exert the same amount of influence as senators from states with large populations and lower rates of gun ownership.² In addition, U.S. Senate rules require 60 votes for cloture (required for an up or down vote on a bill). Republicans, who have become increasingly reliant on the gun lobby for campaign contributions and grassroots support, have used this rule in recent years to prevent bills it does not support from even getting a vote.

This is not the whole picture, however; our survey results showed that large proportions of gun owners support strengthening gun policies. Many legislators who voted against expanding background checks claimed they represented constituents' interests. However, we found that in states where both U.S. senators supported the Manchin-Toomey federal background checks bill, 91% of respondents supported universal background checks for gun sales, compared to 88% in states where one senator voted against the bill, and 87% in states where both senators voted against the bill. Clearly, factors besides public opinion influence politicians' voting behavior.

Interest group theory provides some insight into why public support for stronger gun policies may not be enough to prompt meaningful policy action.³ In the gun policy arena, interest groups in favor of strengthening gun laws—like the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence—have historically been out-funded by the pro-gun NRA, which receives significant funding from gun manufacturers and is commonly acknowledged as one of the most powerful

interest groups in the United States. In 2012, the NRA spent more than \$24 million on political contributions, lobbying, advertising, and other communication activities intended to influence policy outcomes.⁴ The NRA exerts direct political power over members of Congress by grading them based on their gun policy votes and by funding their (or their opponents') campaigns. There are some signs that new interest groups supporting stronger gun policies—including a political action committee funded by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg—may be capable of exerting their own political influence, but fear of an NRA backlash likely contributed to many politicians' decisions to vote against strengthening gun policies.

While the NRA has proved to be extremely capable at influencing gun policy outcomes, the organization in fact represents only about 2%—the group claims 5 million members⁵—of the U.S. population. Why does a group representing such a small subset of Americans have such outsize political influence?

In addition to substantial funding, NRA members and other pro-gun advocates tend to be more politically active, single-issue voters than the majority of Americans who support stronger gun policies, with very strong pro-gun opinions. Politically active individuals contribute money to candidates or organizations, communicate their policy preferences to elected officials, join advocacy groups, and engage in other activities that influence policy outcomes.⁶ This political participation gap provides another explanation for why policy outcomes do not always align with majority public opinion.^{7,8} This could change if the activism spurred by the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary (e.g., the creation of Moms Demand Action, growing faith-based coalitions for stronger gun laws) can be sustained and expanded.

Despite broad public support across both political parties for policies designed to keep guns from dangerous people, gun policy remains one of the most polarizing issues in American politics. "Gun control" symbolizes, for many Americans, a threat to a broad set of conservative values related to a rural way of life, the importance of personal responsibility, and the role of government.⁹ As a result, public opinion polls asking respondents to report whether they think gun control policies should be more or less strict, or whether it is more important to "control gun ownership" or "protect the right of Americans to own guns,"¹⁰ likely measure a constellation of attitudes about gun ownership generally and the role of government rather than support for specific gun policies. In addition, these types of polling questions provide little useful information because it is unclear which policies respondents' are thinking of when they answer. While some respondents

may answer based on their opinions about background check policies, others may answer based on their attitudes toward automatic weapons bans or a host of other policies. Another reason for the disjunction between relatively low support for “stricter gun laws” and high support for specific policies, like background checks, is that many Americans may think current laws are already stricter than they are in reality. A recent CBS News poll concluded that only 49% of Americans think gun laws should be stricter; yet the same poll—consistent with our survey results—found that 85% of Americans (84% of Republicans) support requiring background checks for all gun sales,¹¹ a requirement lacking in federal gun laws and in most states’ gun laws.

Moving forward, for advocates for stronger guns laws, it will be critically important to energize and increase the political participation of the large majority of gun owners who support policies—like universal background checks—to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people.

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