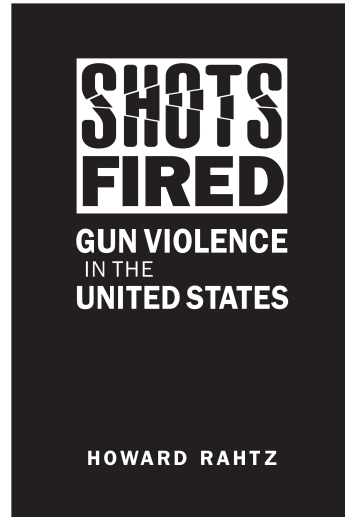


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**Shots Fired:
Gun Violence in
the United States**

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i> , Frank Straub	vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
1 Gun Violence in the United States	1
2 The Right to Keep and Bear Arms	9
3 Firearms and Violence	21
4 Black Market Guns	33
5 The Crime Triangle: Ability to Kill	47
6 The Crime Triangle: Opportunity to Kill	65
7 The Crime Triangle: Desire to Kill	83
8 Rampage Killings	99
9 Daily Homicides	123
10 The Police Response	139
11 Moving Left of Bang	157
12 Do Something!	185
<i>Bibliography</i>	193
<i>Index</i>	213
<i>About the Book</i>	222

1

Gun Violence in the United States

Zephen Xaver called 911 to report he had just shot five people at the Sun Trust Bank in Sebring, Florida. On arrival, police found five women face down, each killed by a gunshot to the back of the head. Police said there was no indication Xaver intended to rob the bank.

—Channel 10 News, Tampa, Florida,
January 23, 2019

Gunfire ripped down the West Englewood Street, wounding at least six people, including two young children [and] people on the scene weren't cooperating with detectives.

—Rosemary Sobeol and Hannah Leone,
Chicago Tribune, April 6, 2019

On November 7, 2018, David Long, a Marine Corps veteran, authored another chapter in the ongoing nightmare of mass killings in the United States. Arriving at the Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, California, at about 11:45 p.m., Long was armed with a Glock .45 handgun. After entering the bar, he threw multiple smoke bombs and began spraying bullets into the crowd. Within minutes, Long had fired fifty rounds, killing eleven people, all of them at close range. He then positioned himself to ambush responding police.

Two minutes after the shooting began, Sergeant Ron Helus of the Thousand Oaks Police Department arrived. Gunshots could still be heard. Sergeant Helus, accompanied by a California Highway Patrol (CHP) officer, entered the bar, engaging in a gun battle with Long. In the smoke and chaos, Helus was shot multiple times. The CHP officer dragged Helus out of the line of fire. Seconds later, Long killed himself. Helus was rushed to the hospital but succumbed to his

wounds. (Adding to the tragic toll of this attack, an autopsy revealed Helus's fatal wound was the result of friendly fire.) Long's motive remains a mystery (Berman, 2018).

Hours earlier, some 2,400 miles to the east, Edward Morris, his girlfriend, Valarcia Blair, and their three-month-old son, Tariq, were shot and killed in their car while sitting at an intersection in Youngstown, Ohio. Police officials described the killings as an ambush and believe Morris was the target. Detectives at the scene recovered multiple shell casings from an assault weapon, and one witness reportedly heard about thirty shots (Gautner, 2018).

About five hours prior to the shooting in Youngstown and another 500 miles to the east, police in Stamford, New York, found a murder-suicide after responding to concerns from coworkers when Christopher German failed to show up for work. Police discovered German and his wife, Lisa, dead inside their residence, both with fatal gunshot wounds. Police believe German killed his wife and then turned the gun on himself (Associated Press, 2018b).

Earlier, in Houston, Texas, a two-year-old found a 9mm handgun hidden in a couch. The child, Christopher Williams, pulled the trigger, and the bullet struck the boy in the head, killing him. Houston police say the gun belonged to the victim's father (KHOU Staff, 2018).

The victims in Thousand Oaks, Youngstown, Houston, and Stamford were just a few of the more than 40,000 Americans killed with guns in 2018. Mass killings like the ones in Thousand Oaks, an attack at a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, synagogue less than two weeks earlier on October 27, and school shootings at Santa Fe High School in Texas and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, have become chapters in a sickeningly familiar ritual played out after each incident. Politicians lead prayers, lower the flag to half-mast, and tweet that everyone in whichever community will be #strong. The police are praised as heroes. They are. Survivors relate stories of courage by victims who acted to save others. They too are heroes. Medical personnel are commended for saving lives, and inevitably some will describe the horrific wounds inflicted and compare the experience to working in a "war zone." It is.

As victims are buried, the debate over what to do reignites. Some people focus on the shooter. We need better mental health treatment. To stop killers, we need to arm and train school staff. No more gun-free zones; they are an open invitation to killers. And famously, from Wayne LaPierre, the head of the National Rifle Association: "to stop a bad guy with a gun, it takes a good guy with a gun" (Overby 2012).

Rather than focus on the individual(s) holding the weapon, gun control advocates focus on the firearm. We should ban assault rifles, close the gun-show loophole, and increase regulation of gun sales and ammunition; all guns should be registered and sales and transfers closely documented.

Mass killings, particularly at schools, become the impetus for study commissions. These review bodies produce voluminous reports with well-thought-out recommendations that end up gathering dust in government offices and libraries. *The Report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel*; *The Columbine Governor's Commission Report*; *The Final Report of the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission*; *Post-incident Review: The Arapahoe High School Active-Shooter Incident*, and other such documents are filled with scores of reasonable steps, most of which have never seen the legislative or policy light of day.

Although mass killings generate most of the debate, casualties from these incidents represent only about 3 percent of America's total gun deaths. The day-to-day gun killings in domestic violence situations, gang disputes, drug-related turf wars, and the constant avalanche of minor disputes turned deadly go largely unnoticed by the larger community. Accidental firearm deaths and gun suicides are likewise ignored.

Guns are the common element, but the dynamics of the gun violence problem vary widely. Guns are clearly the major element in the firearm violence picture, but a laser focus on the weapon obscures reasonable steps in other areas that could have an impact. Gun violence occurs at the intersection where the homicidal intent, the weapon, the victims, and the environment collide, providing the perfect storm for killing. Steps to blunt the intent, remove or modify the weapon, secure victims, and reshape the environment all have significant potential impact, but these more nuanced strategies get lost in the simplistic people-versus-guns debate.

A conceptual model of crime prevention having significant application to the problem of gun violence is the crime triangle (Figure 1.1). Each side of the triangle represents a necessary element for the completion of gun violence. Keeping guns out of the hands of those with violent intent thwarts their ability to murder. Extinguishing the desire to kill makes these individuals less dangerous. Modifying the opportunity to kill acts to safeguard potential victims.

Although used primarily as a model for crime prevention, the crime triangle also has application for gun suicides and accidental

Figure 1.1 The Crime Triangle Model



shooting deaths. Consider the individual seeking to end his or her life. In terms of “ability,” no other method of suicide is as effective as a firearm. Drug overdose, the most common method of suicide attempts in the United States, succeeds only 3 percent of the time while 85 percent of gun suicide attempts succeed (Drexler, 2013).

The presence of a gun in the household increases the risk of suicide, and laws mandating safe gun storage in homes act to limit the “opportunity” available through easy access to a firearm (Brady Center, 2017). The prevention of accidental deaths also fits the model. In the case of two-year-old Christopher Williams, safe gun storage would have limited his “ability” to accidentally kill himself.

Actions targeting mass killings will differ from strategies to reduce street violence. Providing better mental health care may not influence the killer driven by racial hatred. Armed security may not deter suicidal killers as effectively as a locked door. And steps taken to remove assault rifles from the hands of mass killers may not have an impact on the death toll stemming from domestic violence. Under-

standing the big picture of gun violence will lead us to steps that may address only a specific part of the violence tableau, but the cumulative impact of many small but effective steps can be significant.

Before embarking on a discussion of potential steps to reduce gun violence, we must lay out the unique role of constitutional and legislative protection for gun rights in the United States. Finding a balance to protect the constitutional right to “bear arms” while protecting the public from gun violence is the challenge facing government and community leaders. Chapter 2 reviews the legal history of the Second Amendment of the US Constitution as well as the history of legislative actions related to guns. A review of Supreme Court decisions on gun rights and an understanding of the limitations of those rights is an important preamble to the discussion of the variety of gun-regulation measures being proposed.

Chapter 3 reviews the link between guns and the violence plaguing our country. Estimates of the number of guns in the United States vary widely, but there is agreement that it exceeds the total population. The US population of 326 million people owns roughly 393 million guns (Schaffer, 2018). The role of guns in criminal violence in other countries offers some guidance to policy discussions in the United States. The impact of severely restricting gun ownership and possession in the United Kingdom and Australia is also reviewed. The experience in those countries provides some insight into the role firearms accessibility plays in US gun violence.

The illegal or black market in firearms is a major factor in the country’s gun violence. Lost and stolen guns, guns diverted from legitimate sellers, and actions by corrupt gun dealers to provide firearms outside the legal system all contribute to the flow of deadly weapons into the hands of criminals. Chapter 4 outlines the most common paths firearms travel into the black market and the role of these guns in the country’s criminal violence. Efforts by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) to control gun trafficking are described and steps to enhance ATF oversight of the black market are covered. The emerging issue of “ghost guns” in the black market is also addressed.

Chapter 5 addresses potential for intervention in the “ability” leg of the crime triangle to reduce gun violence. The extent to which the availability of guns in America influences homicides, suicides, and accidental gun deaths is reviewed. Without access to a firearm, an individual has diminished ability to do harm. The variety of policies directed at interrupting the connection between a would-be killer and

a gun are outlined. Research indicating the success of some specific policy steps is highlighted.

Chapter 6 focuses on the “opportunity” leg of the crime triangle. Actions to limit the opportunity for gun violence include an emphasis on physical security steps, such as use of cameras and remote locking systems as well as active shooter drills. Children and adults have been drilled to immediately lock down a classroom, run if not in a secure location, hide if unable to run, and fight if unable to run or hide.

Crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) has shown positive results in reducing street crime opportunity. CPTED has primarily been used in brick-and-mortar-type settings like office buildings and parking garages, but its application to all public spaces, particularly schools, represents a promising strategy to reduce opportunity for gun violence.

Chapter 7 explores the “desire” leg of the crime triangle. While some researchers believe human beings have an innate capacity for violence, a significant body of research supports the notion that killers are made, not born. Media violence and violent video games, as well as easy access to websites that reinforce racial hatred, may be factors in an environment contributing to gun violence. The dehumanization of others on hate-group websites was a factor in the killing of worshippers at the Pittsburgh synagogue in 2018 and the 2015 murder of African American churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina. A better understanding of the motivation and desire to kill can assist in thwarting gun violence.

Chapter 8 addresses rampage or mass killings. In the United States, mass shootings have occurred in schools and universities. Gun attacks have happened at places of worship: churches, synagogues, and mosques. Within the past few years, rampage killings have occurred at a manufacturing company, a bank, a restaurant, a newspaper office, a country music festival, an office complex, an airport, a Walmart, a food festival, and others. The scope and varied nature of these incidents make a mockery of simplistic solutions.

Among rampage killings, those at schools are particularly tragic. The Sandy Hook attack on elementary school children in Newtown, Connecticut, represents a depravity hard to fathom. School shootings have been the subject of comprehensive study groups, and a review of these reports in Chapter 8 provides significant insight into steps to avert these attacks.

Chapter 9 reviews homicides in the United States. While rampage killings capture the public’s attention, the slow-motion mass

killing accumulated through individual homicides goes nearly unnoticed. These killings, whether related to drugs, family violence, or personal disputes, are remarkable only in their mundane nature. A review of US homicides, their geographic distribution, victim profiles, and the role of firearms in the violence are examined.

Police are the community institution charged with public safety. Citizens naturally look to the police to control gun violence. Chapter 10 reviews a template for effective police action in controlling gun violence. A comparison of US cities with high and low rates of homicide provides direction in controlling gun violence. While police leaders are normally reticent to involve themselves in political debates, the involvement of police in setting gun policy is crucial. Many of the suggested gun policy changes would directly involve police, and the debate over policy in some instances seems to have willfully ignored law enforcement's input.

Chapter 11 moves to specific recommendations to reduce gun violence in the context of a "left-of-bang" prevention model. The left-of-bang model stems from military experience in the Iraq War in 2006. That year, insurgents were using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and sniper attacks, killing and wounding American troops in unprecedented numbers.

General James Mattis, then commander of the US Marines in Iraq, tasked the corps planners and trainers with the development of a program that "gave Marines the ability to realize an attack was imminent" and to effectively respond. The emphasis of the program was to get marines into a preventive stance, or "left of bang" (Van Horne and Riley, 2014, p. 16).

The parallels with mass killings are instructive. In a mass-shooting incident, both civilians and police act in a well-practiced fashion. While first officers to arrive quickly move to the sound of gunfire, survivors file out, hands up, submitting to brief pat-downs by police. First responders establish staging areas for police, fire, and medical personnel, for the media, and for parents and relatives. The killer surrenders, is killed by police, or dies by his own hand. The crime scene is secured, and warrants are issued for the suspect's residence, workplace, and computers. The social media activity of the suspect is scoured for clues.

As had been the military response to IED attacks, this response to mass killings is "right of bang." In retrospect, in these incidents, we find that there were nearly always clues that an attack was coming. Almost without exception, those who knew the killer profess to

having seen warning signs. There were conflicts with neighbors, school staff, employers, and police. There were episodes of violence, signs of mental illness, a fascination with weapons, and an obsession with prior mass killings. Yet, only after the fact, do we recognize these disjointed elements as underlying indicators of a horrific attack.

Our after-the-fact, “right-of-bang” response also extends to other gun violence. A suicidal person and easy access to a gun make for a lethal combination. Unsecured guns in the home and curious children make for another tragic combination. Our response is typically after the fact. The broad concepts outlined in a left-of-bang strategy represent a fresh way of addressing these issues.