

**Caught in the Crossfire**  
*An Intersectional Analysis of Gun Violence in America*  
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**Abstract:** The United States experiences far more mass shootings than any other country, with increasingly more violent rampages in recent years. Public institutions have done very little to change the way that people obtain guns, giving way for private corporations to write the cultural script around gun ownership and usage. In this paper, we will discuss gendered innovations in gun violence: how considering gender can redefine gun culture. Specifically, we will see that society has defined violence as a means to establish or reassert masculinity. In addition to considering gender, we will take an intersectional approach in evaluating gun violence carried out by white men in America who experience a sense of entitlement that has been disrupted by shifting economic and political tides. Finally, we will explore short-term and long-term remedies to violent tendencies beyond policy change that can reshape the way we approach the dialogue around gun violence.

**Content Warning:** This article contains sensitive content, including anecdotes relating to mass shootings, and analyses of gun violence and homicide trends in America. Readers are advised to take these into account before proceeding.

## **Introduction**

“Today would have been Carmen's 17th birthday. But sadly, we are having to celebrate her life, instead of celebrating what a new year might bring” Robert Schentrup said (CNN, 2018). Schentrup was speaking about his sister at CNN’s town hall for the 2018 Parkland school shooting in which 17 people were killed and 17 others were injured (Chappell, 2021). Students watched classmates die before their very eyes. Parents endured the pain of losing children. America, with less than 5 percent of the global population, has approximately 40 percent of all privately-owned guns (WAMU, 2018) and makes up nearly a third of mass shootings globally (Basu, 2015).

Gun control has been a contentious topic in U.S. politics ever since the adoption of the Second Amendment right to bear arms. Bloated lobbying groups like the National Rifle Association funnel millions of dollars each year into campaigns that prevent gun control bills from passing and boost pro-gun politicians into local and federal offices (BBC, 2020). Moreover, gun manufacturers enjoy legal exemption from lawsuits when crimes are committed with their products under the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act. But in 2018, the Connecticut Supreme Court passed a decision that could unravel this exemption. In the court case, families affected by the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting sued Remington Arms under Connecticut’s unfair trade practices law for knowingly targeting disaffected young men in militaristic advertisements. The advertisements for the AR-15 rifle used in the shooting featured taglines like “consider your man card reissued” and “forces of opposition, bow down” (Figure 1). In a world where one feels powerless, it could be enough cause for them to pick up a gun. In 2019, Remington appealed the case to the U.S. Supreme Court, and the court declined to hear the case, which allowed the lawsuit to proceed. Finally, in February 2022, the families agreed to a \$73 million settlement of the lawsuit against Remington Arms (Collins, 2022). This case is a rare incident of a gun manufacturer being held responsible for the harm caused by their product.

Therefore, it forces us to re-evaluate the question of gun control from a different lens. The issue of gun violence in America persists throughout decades of political debate, and political gridlock in government apparatuses prevents meaningful progress on gun reform bills. While the avenue for change through policy is narrow, the hypermasculine Remington Arms advertisements reveal that we can examine gun violence from a different angle: the cultural scripts that frame violence as an acceptable means to reassert one’s masculinity. In my paper, I will be analyzing gendered innovations in gun violence: how considering gender can redefine gun culture. Society has defined violence as a means to establish masculinity, encouraging those who have been emasculated to use guns to reassert their power. Additionally, through an intersectional lens, we notice that white men with socioeconomic qualms make up those who are most attached to their guns. As a result, guns have become explicitly masculine symbols of power among those who feel their identity and livelihoods threatened by the status quo.

## **How Gender Norms Shape Gun Culture**

Since antiquity, violence has been hyper-masculinized by Western society and media, from mandatory military service to violent video games. These social norms manifest themselves in a disturbing pattern found in mass shooters. The Violence Project, a nonprofit and nonpartisan research group, maintains a database of 180 mass shooters from 1966 to the present. They coded each shooter based on 170 different variables ranging from household size to criminal history – but the single, most patterned trait is gender (The Violence Project, 2021). In all but four cases, the perpetrators were men – that’s 98 percent of all shooters. This is alarming because approximately 60 percent of gun owners are men (Horowitz, 2020).

In looking at gender differences, we uncover social narratives that function as prescriptions for violent behavior in men. Society has created and enforced various attributes associated with masculinity, such as physical dominance. When these identity-based characteristics are challenged, people turn to guns as a way to provide gendered status. Bridges and Tober (2018) describe this phenomenon as a *social identity threat*: when a person finds their identity called into question, they tend to overcompensate for the qualities they lack. For instance, bullying victimization tends to produce gun-supportive attitudes in men. In an effort “to regain a sense of power and avoid further emasculation,” one will try to conform to masculine stereotypes (Ray et al., 2021, p. 396). One such stereotype is responding with physical force when provoked. Kimmel and Mahler (2003, p. 1445) found in school shootings between 1982 and 2001 that nearly all the shooters experienced gender-specific or homophobic bullying, such as being called a “faggot” before their attacks. The researchers posit that the shooters, when faced with these threats, felt the need to reestablish their manhood through violence (Kimmel and Mahler, 2003, p. 1440). This retaliatory response can be traced back to childhood development: “Four times more teenage boys than teenage girls think fighting is appropriate when someone cuts to the front of a line” (Kimmel and Mahler, 2003, p. 1450). At a young age, violence is seen as a viable form of conflict resolution, more so among boys than girls.

Furthermore, manliness, as a social construct, needs to be bestowed by a peer group (Shuffelton, 2015, p. 388). Gun manufacturers act as this peer group, promising their consumers renewed dignity. Yet, in this era of gun culture, advertisers have used increasingly questionable ways to entice prospective gun owners. Analyzing 1154 advertisements from 65 different issues of the *Guns* magazine, Yamane documents the shift in guns portrayed as tools for hunting and sport to weapons for home and personal protection (Yamane, 2020). While the messaging continues to feed into gender stereotypes, the target object is no longer animals or inanimate objects, but other human beings. These advertisements contribute to cultural scripts that nudge disillusioned young men to pick up a gun and use it against actual people.

The disillusioned are not the only ones susceptible to societal pressures. A common social narrative is that a good man should be the household’s protector and breadwinner. In his book *Gunfight*, Adam Winkler (2013) writes that his wife and his “beloved” daughter “embody the reason a law-abiding person might want to own a gun”. These level-headed acknowledgments illuminate the rationale behind “moderate proponents of expansive Second Amendment rights [who] thereby [make] guns widely available within American communities”

(Shuffelton, 2015, p. 400). Even within the Republican party which traditionally favors gun rights, men are more likely than women to support pro-gun policy. For example, 60 percent of Republican women favor banning assault-style weapons compared to 28 percent of Republican men. Moreover, Republican men are more supportive of carrying concealed guns without a permit compared to Republican women, 52 versus 24 percent (Horowitz, 2020). By analyzing gender differences, we can dissect varying perceptions toward gun ownership within political groups that traditionally support gun rights.

In addition to physical toughness, men also face social pressure to be emotionally tough. Men are far less likely to seek mental health treatment compared to women, so their conditions often go untreated and instead feed into dangerous and unhealthy behaviors (Chatmon, 2020). Men reportedly die by suicide at a rate four times higher than women (Mental Health America, 2020). Moreover, the annual number of deaths due to alcohol-related causes is 62,000 for men compared to 26,000 for women (Mental Health America, 2020). The stigma against emotional expression and weakness in men leaves them with very few outlets to release their unheard anxiety, anger, and depression. Because suicide is a weak way to die – “one at odds with the script of masculinity” – shooters look for “status-winning, manhood-enhancing departures” (Shuffelton, 2015, p. 394). Altogether, social expectations, mental health stigma, and easy access to firearms make for a dangerous concoction conducive to gun violence.

### **Race and Class in Gun Violence**

We would be missing the full picture if we looked only at gender. If we take an intersectional approach, race and class factors are also correlated to one’s propensity toward gun violence. While white men make up 32 percent of Americans, they are 61 percent of gun owners (Lind, 2015) and 52 percent of mass shooters (The Violence Project, 2021). In the past, white men have benefitted from privileges made possible by structural inequality. While these privileges still exist, social movements in the 20th and 21st centuries are chipping away at the inequalities that historically worked in their favor. This has led to a new strain of white male identity politics fueled by “resentment, paranoia, and apocalyptic visions, often exploding into violence” (Shuffelton, 2015, p. 399).

Kimmel (2018) coined the term *aggrieved entitlement* to refer to the “gendered sense of entitlement thwarted by larger economic and political shifts” that white men are experiencing in America. Aggrieved entitlement often leads to “racist or sexist sentiments toward women and racial minorities” (Bridges, 2018). In the summer of 2019, these sentiments escalated into a mass shooting at the busiest Walmart in El Paso, Texas that resulted in 23 deaths and 23 injuries. Located a few miles from the Mexican border, the store caters to a predominantly Hispanic population. Moments before the shooting, the perpetrator posted his manifesto on the anonymous messaging board 8chan featuring white nationalist and anti-immigrant themes (The New York Times, 2019). The media captured these incidents, creating an insidious online feedback loop that inspired people who share similar sentiments to mimic past shooters. (Harwell, 2019).

Varying degrees of gun-supportive attitudes fall short of outright homicide but still contribute to widespread firearm availability. In a study analyzing 1600 survey responses, Mencken and Froese (2017) found that white men who experience a great deal of anxiety about their economic futures are the group of gun owners most attached to their guns. On the other hand, non-white gun owners in economic peril feel less empowered by their guns. The reason white men respond more acutely to financial strain as opposed to non-white men may be that it deviates from the economy which historically favored them. Specifically, Kimmel (2013) argues that it is the downwardly mobile white men who “form the backbone of the Tea Party, of the listeners of outrage radio, of the neo-Nazis and white supremacists” (p. 23). Mencken and Froese (2017) continue that “white men in economic distress find comfort in guns as a means to reestablish a sense of individual power and moral certitude in the face of changing times” as guns are a cultural symbol and physical tool for maintaining power and autonomy.

Gun empowerment, in turn, affects policy attitudes and voting behavior: “[g]un empowerment is statistically associated with strong opposition to bans on semiautomatic weapons, ammunition clips, and handguns” (Mencken & Froese, 2017, p. 3). Furthermore, greater gun empowerment indicates less support for mental health screening in background checks and more support for concealed weapons (Mencken & Froese, 2017). These inclinations echo our aforementioned concerns related to mental health and compound on preexisting issues in gun control.

### **Developing community-based public safety models**

Fortunately, communities and non-profit organizations are recognizing the need to reduce gun violence by addressing its socioeconomic factors. Advance Peace is an organization that has successfully decreased firearm homicides and assaults in several northern California cities, saving millions of dollars that would have otherwise gone to policing. For instance, Stockton, a city that was ranked the tenth most dangerous city in the U.S. in 2012, has seen a 20% drop in gun homicides and assaults since the program launched in 2018 (Harwell, 2019).

Advance Peace’s gun violence reduction program provides an empirically proven opportunity to “reimagine public safety models that rely on policing” (Natividad, 2021). The organization’s Peacemaker Fellowship enrolls individuals most likely to be firearm offenders “as determined by comprehensive data analyses, referrals from key partners, [and] street knowledge of the outreach workers” (Corburn & Fukutome, 2021). The program’s centerpiece is the LifeMAP (or management action plan), a series of short-term and long-term goals that each fellow establishes for themselves across multiple life areas: education, employment, housing, transportation, finances, mental health, relationships, and social connection (Advance Peace, n.d.).

Short-term goals include “participating in substance abuse treatment or individual counseling, attending parenting classes, or paying outstanding vehicle violations,” while long-term goals may be “rebuilding family relationships or completing a GED program” (Advance Peace, n.d.). Through self-defined targets, the program can help shift the gendered narrative from

finding self-worth in guns to discovering purposeful living through actionable goals. Advance Peace also provides services such as job training, cognitive behavioral therapy, and social services navigation, which alleviates the financial pressures that may cause people to turn to guns for solace. Furthermore, the participants attend life skills classes that foster dialogue on community trauma and build trusting relationships for group healing (Corburn & Fukutome, 2021). The program offerings rewrite cultural narratives of masculinity and provide a holistic approach to extracting root problems that plague firearm offenders and combat tendencies that produce gun violence, breaking its vicious cycle.

### **Next Steps**

Ultimately, the solution to gun violence is not a one-size-fits-all approach. We need to analyze gender against shifting political and socioeconomic conditions. First, gun manufacturers should evaluate how their advertisements reinforce gender norms and violent narratives. Media shapes social perceptions, which in turn shape real-world behavior. Legal institutions should take advantage of the precedent set forth by the Sandy Hook decision and find avenues similar to Connecticut's unfair trade practices law to open the floodgates for lawsuits against irresponsible marketing.

Second, we cannot be oversimplifying mental health problems. Politicians and media commentators are quick to generalize mass shooters as "mentally ill", even though each person's circumstances are unique and complex. Many shooting incidents are caused by chronic issues such as stressful economic burdens or childhood trauma. Misrepresenting the mentally ill as irrational and unpredictable can have adverse consequences, such as social ostracization or escalation with law enforcement officers, that would only worsen their conditions (Metzl et al., 2021). Therefore, we need to adopt open dialogue models, such as those used by Advance Peace.

Finally, we need to hold ourselves accountable for the gender stereotypes that have been embedded into societal institutions ranging from education to social media. Harmful assumptions create an environment hostile to personal growth, so we must challenge tradition to ignite a virtuous cycle of honest communication, in place of unnecessary violence.

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