

Chapter 67

“What We Need Is Bullet Control”: Could Regulation of Bullets Reduce Mass Shootings?

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ABSTRACT

Following high-profile mass shootings in the United States, there are policy debates about gun regulation; yet, for the most part, these stall. This chapter suggests that an alternative way to frame this issue would be through “bullet control,” centering on the ammunition used. In order to inflict the greatest degree of damage possible, mass shooters tend to carry large quantities of bullets and large-capacity magazines with them. Harm-inducing bullets, such as hollow-points which penetrate certain parts of the body, have been used in previous mass shootings. Policy proposals could center on these areas to reduce harm in a mass shooting. Another regulation could focus on mandating background checks for ammunition. Interviews were conducted with six participants with knowledge of gun policies and/or gun violence prevention advocacy. Findings from interviews indicate support for these policy proposals. Discussed are ways to increase public support for these proposals via framing strategies. Also deliberated is whether the current political climate is conducive to pass legislation.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, it is estimated that, on average, there are mass killings involving firearms every two weeks and school shootings once a month (Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi & Castillo-Chavez, 2015). Given guns are the most common weapons used in mass killings, they are an obvious target for policy proposals post-incident (Harding, Fox & Mehta, 2002; Levin & Madfis, 2009; Vossekuil, 2004). Mass shootings are a particular type of gun violence, defined as the killing of four or more victims with

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a firearm within a short period of time (minutes to hours) (Kelly, 2012). These incidents tend to garner greater media attention than the more “commonplace” gun deaths (Kerr, 2018a). Scholars have found, however, that debates about gun policies following mass shootings tend to fail to translate into concrete policy outcomes (Goss, 2006; Fleming, 2016; Kerr, 2018a; Spitzer, 2012).

An alternative approach is to concentrate on the ammunition used rather than the firearms themselves — this is known as “bullet control.”¹ The thinking behind “bullet control” — as opposed to what has been traditionally been known as “gun control” — is an attempt to depoliticize the issue of regulating guns into a frame that is more persuasive and could possibly change attitudes (see Aaroe, 2011; Callaghan, 2005; Gross, 2008). Healey (1998, p.1) argued that “ammunition control is the next frontier in U.S. gun control policy.” Moreover, harm-inducing bullets, such as armor-piercing bullets, have the potential to cause greater injuries and deaths (*Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence*, n.d.). Given the perpetrator intends to kill and injure as many people as possible in a short period of time, these types of ammunition have a link to mass shootings, as well as stockpiling large quantities of bullets (see, for instance, *Jefferson County Sheriff*, n.d.; *Sandy Hook Advisory Report*, 2015; *Virginia Tech Review Panel*, 2007/2009).

This chapter explores the regulation of bullets as a means to reduce the severity of mass shootings. This would take the form of regulating which persons were able to purchase ammunition and the type of bullets that were available to purchase. To explore the viability of these proposals, interviews were carried out with activists within the gun violence prevention movement. The gun violence prevention movement is an area in which there has not been a lot of research carried out. For that reason, the decision was made to focus solely on that “side” of the debate, with there being no representation from gun rights advocates. Results from interviews indicate that large quantities of bullets and harm-inducing ammunition are linked to a number of mass shootings. Extrapolating from this, it may be possible that “bullet control” could reduce the severity and amount of injuries and deaths caused in mass shooting incidents. Explored first of all will be the proposal of background checks for buying ammunition. Following on from that, regulations pertaining to the types and number of bullets sold will be deliberated. This chapter will conclude with some thoughts about how viable reframing the issue of guns and mass shootings into one of “bullet control” would be. This will be related to the current political climate and public sentiment about this issue.

Bullet Control: What Does It Mean?

“Guns don’t kill people, bullets do,” argued Senator Patrick Moynihan (quoted in Urbina, 2018). At the crux of this argument is the idea that without the ammunition firearms lose their deadly nature; indicating the rationale to the “bullet control” argument. Despite this, bullet control is a subject that has not really been fully debated in public discourse. Following an incident like a mass shooting, firearms tend to be a target of blame (see Harding et al., 2002; Levin & Madfis, 2009; Vossekuil, 2004); yet little attention is given to the ammunition used. The focus on guns after a mass shooting tends to be fruitless, with most proposals then failing to materialize into policies (Fleming, 2016; Kerr, 2018a).

One of the reasons for this is the gun debate in the United States is rather contentious and partisan in nature (see Spitzer, 2012). Competing ideological belief systems have the potential to “prevent or promote social change” (Lukes, 1974/2005, p. 149). In this case, these competing beliefs pertain to the right to own and carry guns versus the feeling that guns should be regulated to improve safety. When these ideologies become entrenched, their ideological nature is “disguised”; hence, these become routine, normalized and acceptable beliefs to hold (Fairclough, 1995, p. 82). Moreover, there tends to be a “struggle

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