

# A Public Health Approach to Tackling the Role of Culture in Shaping the Gun Violence Epidemic in the United States

Public Health Reports  
2021, Vol. 136(1) 6-9  
© 2020, Association of Schools and  
Programs of Public Health  
All rights reserved.  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/0033354920965263  
journals.sagepub.com/home/phr



Salma M. Abdalla, MBBS, MPH<sup>1</sup> ; Katherine M. Keyes, PhD, MPH<sup>2</sup>; and Sandro Galea, DrPH, MD<sup>3</sup>

Gun-related violence is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality in the United States. In 2016, more than 37 000 firearm-related deaths occurred in the country.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, 2 or 3 firearm-related injuries occur for every firearm-related death.<sup>2</sup> The burden gun violence poses for the health of the population is disproportionately larger than it is in many countries. About 35% of global firearm-related suicides occur in the United States and, compared with other high-income countries, firearm-related homicide rates are 25 times higher in the United States.<sup>1,3</sup>

Increasing evidence links high rates of gun violence to the ubiquity of guns, high rates of firearm ownership, and low barriers to accessing firearms in the United States.<sup>4-9</sup> Several high-income countries have reduced firearm-related violence through interventions that reduced the availability of guns. For example, after a mass shooting tragedy in 1996, the government of Australia carried out a national reform that restricted ownership of legal firearms, established a firearm registry, and implemented a permit requirement for new purchases, among other measures.<sup>10,11</sup> In 2014, a total of 32 firearm-related killings occurred in Australia, marking a 63% decline from 1990.<sup>12</sup> Similar policies are implemented in Canada, Norway, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and other countries.<sup>13</sup>

Conversely, the United States does not have a robust federal approach to limit the availability of firearms. Moreover, states vary widely in the laws enacted to regulate the sale of firearms, background checks, and preventing children's access to firearms. For example, the federal law that requires background checks has several loopholes (eg, allowing gun dealers to sell firearms without a background check if the Federal Bureau of Investigation does not complete the background check in 3 days), and only 6 states require safety training for people interested in purchasing a firearm.<sup>6</sup> People in the United States own about half of the firearms designated for civilian use in the world, which is, in part, indicative of the broad availability of, and permissive access to, guns.<sup>14</sup>

## Culture and the Resistance to Tackle Gun Violence in the United States

Given the heavy price the United States pays for its widespread availability of guns and the evidence that limiting availability can reduce firearm-related violence, it seems reasonable to ask: Why is there resistance to limit the availability of guns on a national level?

Federal laws have not changed drastically to restrict access to firearms despite mounting evidence supporting the importance of gun control and as tragic, highly publicized, incidents involving gun violence continue to befall the United States. Even mass shootings at schools and churches—such as in Sandy Hook, New Jersey, and Charleston, South Carolina—did not create enough momentum to trigger a substantive federal legislative overhaul.

A wide range of factors, including commercial influences, contribute to the current state of affairs and create a set of circumstances that are simply different than that of other high-income countries. Central to these factors, the role culture plays in maintaining the gun status quo in the United States is receiving increasing attention in the sphere of academic public health.<sup>2,15,16</sup> Culture is a complex concept that encompasses many areas. In 1871, anthropologist Edward Taylor defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”<sup>17-19</sup> The meaning of culture is often contested and depends on the discipline, which indicates the need for a

<sup>1</sup> Epidemiology Department, Boston University School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department of Epidemiology, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, New York, NY, USA

<sup>3</sup> Boston University School of Public Health, Boston, MA, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Salma M. Abdalla, MBBS, MPH, Boston University School of Public Health, Epidemiology Department, Boston, MA 02118, USA.  
Email: abdallas@bu.edu

multidisciplinary understanding to determine the role of culture in shaping the epidemic of gun violence .

Scholars from several disciplines have explained how complex social (eg, individualism as the defining characteristic of the country), legal (the second amendment, federal structure, and lobbying laws), and historical (eg, slavery and racism) factors have interacted to create a gun culture that favors individual rights over gun control.<sup>20-28</sup> For example, one study found that cultural views, rather than scientific arguments or facts, shape political positions on gun control among people living in the United States.<sup>29</sup>

Public health scholars have also attempted to quantify gun culture. One analysis found that identifying with a social gun culture was associated with a 2.25 times greater likelihood of gun ownership compared with not identifying with a social gun culture.<sup>30</sup> However, public health scholarship has lagged behind in efforts to understand gun culture, which may guide public health action on the gun violence epidemic. This paucity of scholarship concerning gun culture stands in contrast to other health outcomes such as alcohol, in which public health scholarship has focused on the intersection of alcohol policy and drinking culture to formulate recommendations to reduce alcohol-related harm.<sup>31</sup> The comparatively absent literature in public health on gun culture is understandable. Although culture is indubitably a foundational determinant of health—it shapes where we live, eat, play, and grow—it is difficult to measure the effects of culture on the health of populations and even more difficult to intervene to change a culture that undermines the public's health.<sup>32-34</sup> What, therefore, might be a reasonable public health approach to tackling gun culture to mitigate the gun violence epidemic in the United States?

## A Public Health Approach to Changing Gun Culture

Changing gun culture seems to be a necessary element of tackling the epidemic of gun violence in the United States. Changing gun culture will require creating a new narrative that frames gun violence as a public health issue and highlights the consequences of gun violence on population health. Shifting popular opinion on a prevailing cultural preference has contributed meaningfully to reducing harm in the case of other adverse influences on health. Until the 1960s, up to 75% of driving-related injuries and deaths were attributed to driving while under the influence of alcohol.<sup>35</sup> The predominant narrative at the time was that these deaths were largely unavoidable consequences of accidents, and laws against driving under the influence were rarely implemented. Consumer advocacy and grassroots mobilization efforts, which formalized and amplified the voices of victims and their families, rallied resources to mount campaigns for culture change. Advocate groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving contributed to legislative efforts for safe road

use, often persisting against pushback from lawmakers and the public.<sup>36,37</sup>

Another example is the movement to reframe the national conversation on smoking. For years, smoking was viewed as an individual behavior, a habit for millions, and it was romanticized in films and in advertisements. Outcries against smoking in the 1960s and 1970s were opposed by a well-connected and well-financed industry. However, this social movement helped advance antismoking policies by highlighting the adverse health outcomes associated with smoking and the rights of nonsmokers.<sup>38</sup> With these examples in mind, we propose 4 avenues that may be useful to public health in its efforts to tackle the gun violence crisis.

First, taking a multidisciplinary approach to the crisis of gun violence can help us identify the appropriate actions needed to push against a deeply entrenched gun culture. Multiple social sciences disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology, have grappled with the meaning and implications of culture for a long time. These disciplines are equipped with the theoretical and methodologic tools to study gun culture and are indispensable partners to public health on this front. Taking a multidisciplinary approach also suggests that tackling gun violence will require addressing the root causes of gun culture, such as racism, which affects almost all aspects of life in the United States. For example, the racial turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s fueled talks of gun control. It was then that special interest groups capitalized on the moment to promote discussions on gun rights as an important element of the national identity. Gun manufacturers used this moment to promote a narrative concerning “the urgent need to protect gun rights” as a means to promote sales.<sup>39</sup>

Second, public health has little choice but to engage the media to frame the discussion on gun violence as a public health emergency rather than a political debate. This framing can, in part, be accomplished by collaborating with the media to present gun violence research to a broad audience. The democratization of media through digital means provides a potential avenue to cultural change that was unavailable in previous decades. In 2018, emergency medicine physicians mobilized the power of both storytelling and social media (Twitter) by sharing their daily experiences of treating patients suffering from the tragic consequences of gun violence.<sup>40</sup> The mobilization was organic—like many other efforts by community members working to improve the health of populations. However, it is difficult to change culture by solely relying on such spontaneous efforts.<sup>41</sup> Changing culture will require more deliberate and sustained campaigns to continuously highlight the human cost of gun violence, as was done as part of the larger advocacy efforts to reduce alcohol-involved driving.<sup>42,43</sup>

A third approach requires engaging allies with similar goals. Movements such as the March for Our Lives have the potential to push the conversation in the right direction. After a shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland,

Florida, students organized a protest of about 800 000 people in Washington, DC—not counting the other smaller protests in multiple cities—calling for stricter gun control legislation.<sup>44</sup> Concerted progress will require collaborating with such movements to advance the narrative of gun violence as a public health emergency. Other potential allies can be movements with values that align with the goal of tackling the gun violence epidemic (eg, the Against Suicide Movement) and institutions that shape culture in the United States, such as churches and even movie production companies.

Fourth, although shifts in culture can lead to a change in policy, a policy overhaul can sometimes precede a cultural shift.<sup>45</sup> For example, shall issue laws in numerous states—which allowed people to walk around with firearms on their bodies—helped further the narrative that firearms are an acceptable everyday cultural object in the United States.<sup>21</sup> The opposite can be true. At the time of implementing gun-control policies, Australia had a high rate of firearm ownership. Yet, changing the laws was then followed by changes in public views. One factor that helped push gun law reform forward was the commitment of a newly elected Australian prime minister who was willing to use his political capital to create a large coalition of advocates for gun control.<sup>10</sup> The role of key political actors in occasioning inflections in culture holds an important lesson for efforts aimed at changing gun culture in the United States.

## Conclusion

The United States has a unique gun culture that is driven by a wide range of legal, historic, and societal factors. Tackling the gun violence epidemic requires taking gun culture into account. Shifting the narrative concerning guns will require engaging other disciplines, harnessing the power of social media and storytelling, collaborating with powerful allies, and urging for gun control legislation that may precede a cultural change.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Salma M. Abdalla, MBBS, MPH  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5474-4521>

## References

1. GBD 2016 Causes of Death Collaborators. Global, regional, and national age–sex specific mortality for 264 causes of death, 1980–2016: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2016. *Lancet*. 2017;390(10100):1151–1210. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(17)32152-9
2. Galea S, Abdalla SM. The public's health and the social meaning of guns. *Palgrave Commun*. 2019;5(1):1–4. doi:10.1057/s41599-019-0322-x
3. Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund. Gun violence in America. Published 2018. Accessed December 19, 2018. <https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-america>
4. Bangalore S, Messerli FH. Gun ownership and firearm-related deaths. *Am J Med*. 2013;126(10):873–876. doi:10.1016/j.amjmed.2013.04.012
5. Kellermann AL, Rivara FP, Somes G, et al. Suicide in the home in relation to gun ownership. *N Engl J Med*. 1992;327(7):467–472. doi:10.1056/NEJM199208133270705
6. Kalesan B, Mobily ME, Keiser O, Fagan JA, Galea S. Firearm legislation and firearm mortality in the USA: a cross-sectional, state-level study. *Lancet*. 2016;387(10030):1847–1855. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(15)01026-0
7. Hemenway D, Miller M. Firearm availability and homicide rates across 26 high-income countries. *J Trauma*. 2000;49(6):985–988. doi:10.1097/00005373-200012000-00001
8. Hemenway D, Azrael D, Conner A, Miller M. Variation in rates of fatal police shootings across US states: the role of firearm availability. *J Urban Health*. 2019;96(1):63–73. doi:10.1007/s11524-018-0313-z
9. Wintemute GJ, Hemenway D, Webster D, Pierce G, Braga AA. Gun shows and gun violence: fatally flawed study yields misleading results. *Am J Public Health*. 2010;100(10):1856–1860. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2010.191916
10. Chapman S, Alpers P, Agho K, Jones M. Australia's 1996 gun law reforms: faster falls in firearm deaths, firearm suicides, and a decade without mass shootings. *Inj Prev*. 2006;12(6):365–372. doi:10.1136/ip.2006.013714
11. Chapman S, Alpers P, Jones M. Association between gun law reforms and intentional firearm deaths in Australia, 1979–2013. *JAMA*. 2016;316(3):291–299. doi:10.1001/jama.2016.8752
12. Australian Associated Press. Australia's murder rate falls to record low of one person per 100,000. *The Guardian*. June 18, 2017. Accessed December 19, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/jun/18/australias-rate-falls-to-record-low-of-one-person-per-100000>
13. Masters J. U.S. gun policy: global comparisons. Council on Foreign Relations. August 6, 2019. Accessed December 19, 2018. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-gun-policy-global-comparisons>
14. Small Arms Survey. Research note 9: estimating civilian owned firearms. Published September 2011. Accessed December 19, 2018. <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/about-us/highlights/highlight-research-note-9-estimating-civilian-owned-firearms.html>
15. Hemenway D, Miller M. Public health approach to the prevention of gun violence. *N Engl J Med*. 2013;368(21):2033–2035. doi:10.1056/NEJMs1302631

16. Branas CC, Flescher A, Formica MK, et al. Academic public health and the firearm crisis: an agenda for action. *Am J Public Health*. 2017;107(3):365-367. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2016.303619
17. Kroeber AL, Kluckhohn C. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. The Museum; 1952.
18. Baldwin JR, Faulkner SL, Hecht ML, Lindsley SL, eds. *Redefining Culture: Perspectives Across the Disciplines*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2006.
19. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Culture and cognitive science. Published November 2, 2011. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/culture-cogsci>
20. Stroud A. *Good Guys With Guns: The Appeal and Consequences of Concealed Carry*. University of South Carolina Press; 2015.
21. Carlson J. *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline*. Oxford University Press; 2015.
22. Yamane D. The sociology of U.S. gun culture. *Sociol Compass*. 2017;11(7):e12497. doi:10.1111/soc4.12497
23. Kohn AA. *Shooters: Myths and Realities of America's Gun Cultures*. Oxford University Press; 2004.
24. Carlson JD. States, subjects and sovereign power: lessons from global gun cultures. *Theor Criminol*. 2014;18(3):335-353. doi:10.1177/1362480613508424
25. Johnson N. *Negroes and the Gun: The Black Tradition of Arms*. Prometheus Books; 2014.
26. Metz J. What guns mean: the symbolic lives of firearms. *Palgrave Commun*. 2019;5(1):35. doi:10.1057/s41599-019-0240-y
27. Carlson JD. 'I don't dial 911': American gun politics and the problem of policing. *Br J Criminol*. 2012;52(6):1113-1132. doi:10.1093/bjc/azs039
28. French DJ. Biting the bullet: shifting the paradigm from law enforcement to epidemiology; a public health approach to firearm violence in America. *Syracuse L Rev*. 1995;45:1073-1105.
29. Kahan DM, Braman D. More statistics, less persuasion: a cultural theory of gun-risk perceptions. *Univ Pa L Rev*. 2003;151(4):1291-1327. doi:10.2307/3312930
30. Kalesan B, Villarreal MD, Keyes KM, Galea S. Gun ownership and social gun culture. *Inj Prev*. 2016;22(3):216-220. doi:10.1136/injuryprev-2015-041586
31. Skog OJ. The collectivity of drinking cultures: a theory of the distribution of alcohol consumption. *Br J Addict*. 1985;80(1):83-99. doi:10.1111/j.1360-0443.1985.tb05294.x
32. Eckersley RM. Culture. In: Galea S, ed. *Macrosocial Determinants of Population Health*. Springer; 2007:193-209.
33. Anderson KM, Olson S. *Leveraging Culture to Address Health Inequalities: Examples From Native Communities: Workshop Summary*. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; 2013.
34. Fernandez JCA. Cultural determinants of health: an approach to promoting equity. *Saúde e Sociedade*. 2014;23(1):167-179.
35. Waller JA. Use and misuse of alcoholic beverages as factor in motor vehicle accidents. *Public Health Rep*. 1966;81(7):591-597. doi:10.2307/4592785
36. Lerner BH. *One for the Road: Drunk Driving Since 1900*. JHUP Books; 2011.
37. Walsh DC. The shifting boundaries of alcohol policy. *Health Aff (Millwood)*. 1990;9(2):47-62. doi:10.1377/hlthaff.9.2.47
38. Nathanson CA. Social movements as catalysts for policy change: the case of smoking and guns. *J Health Polit Policy Law*. 1999;24(3):421-488. doi:10.1215/03616878-24-3-421
39. Burbick J. *Gun Show Nation: Gun Culture and American Democracy*. The New Press; 2006.
40. Haag M. Doctors revolt after N.R.A. tells them to "stay in their lane" on gun policy. *The New York Times*. Published November 13, 2018. Accessed December 23, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/us/nra-stay-in-your-lane-doctors.html>
41. Galea S. Physicians' voices on gun violence and other important public health issues. *JAMA*. 2019;321(2):141-142. doi:10.1001/jama.2018.20754
42. Elder RW, Shults RA, Sleet DA, et al. Effectiveness of mass media campaigns for reducing drinking and driving and alcohol-involved crashes: a systematic review. *Am J Prev Med*. 2004;27(1):57-65. doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2004.03.002
43. Jernigan DH, Wright PA. Media advocacy: lessons from community experiences. *J Public Health Policy*. 1996;17(3):306-330. doi:10.2307/3343268
44. Durando J. March for Our Lives could be the biggest single-day protest in D.C.'s history. *USA Today*. March 24, 2018. Accessed December 19, 2018. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2018/03/24/march-our-lives-could-become-biggest-single-day-protest-d-c-nations-history/455675002>
45. Mettler S, Soss J. The consequences of public policy for democratic citizenship: bridging policy studies and mass politics. *Perspect Polit*. 2004;2(1):55-73. doi:10.1017/S1537592704000623