

Ethical Issues Analysis Paper:
Gun Control in the United States
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I. Introduction

The United States Declaration of Independence grants all American citizens with three examples of unalienable rights, “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The government must protect these rights. However, in recent years, with the increase of gun violence and mass shootings in this nation, it seems as though the lax state-regulated gun control laws are directly affecting the fundamental right to “life.” Firearm legislation varies widely across the United States, including policies on firearm purchasing and selling, firearm ownership, firearm storage, and firearm carrying. (Yelderman, Joseph, West., & Butler 2019) These varying legislations result in an ethical dilemma because the principles, norms and standards of conduct in regards to gun control in America are extremely scattered. The U.S. government should divert from scattered state-regulated firearm legislation and implement universal gun control laws that protect all inhabitants of this country.

One thing that does not vary as widely as firearm legislation is a steady rise of collective discontent people have with current gun control policies. In September 2019, executives from 145 businesses, including Uber, Twitter, and Levi Strauss, sent a letter to the Senate urgently requesting it enact gun control bills already introduced in the House, in what might be the most cohesive effort from American businesses to advance firearms legislation. The letter calls for expanded background checks on all gun sales, and red flag laws, which would keep guns out of the hands of at-risk people. (Voytko, 2019) This stance shows how gun control laws intertwine with business ethics. One critical quote from the letter states, “we are writing to you because we have a responsibility and obligation to stand up for the safety of our employees, customers and

all Americans in the communities we serve across the country.” Most of these businesses have 500 or more employees who deserve protection from mass shooting instances since many of the instances happen to occur in a place of business such as schools, night clubs, movie theaters and department stores.

II. Where did the issue come from?

The gun industry operates in a way that makes it easy for criminals to get their hands on illegal weapons. According to Smith & Wesson’s former senior vice president, Robert Hass, the industry as a whole is aware of the criminal misuse of firearms that make their way into the black market from multiple thousands of unsupervised federal firearms licenses. In spite of their knowledge, the industry’s position has consistently been to take no independent action to ensure responsible distribution practices. (Wintemute, 2002) This lack of regulation results in high accessibility, which ultimately leads to more harm to society.

There are both legal and illegal markets for guns in the United States. Licensed gun dealers fall under the legal market and are required by law to enact waiting periods and submit purchasing information for background checks. In contrast, unlicensed retailers do not follow the same regulations. Unlicensed vendors, who make up 25% to 50% of all persons selling guns at gun shows, sometimes even advertise their exemption from the regulations that apply to licensed retailers. (Wintemute, 2002)

When gun retailers actively supply guns from the legal market to the illegal market, it is known as trafficking. The problem is most visible (although probably not the most extensive) at gun shows and flea markets that occur approximately 4,000 times a year in the United States.

Under current law, a large number of firearms at these public markets are sold anonymously, so there is virtually no way to trace them. (Wintemute, 2002) Therefore, firearms frequently slip through the cracks and are sold to criminals, gang members and underage buyers. It would be in the government's best interest to implement tougher laws on firearm retailers in order to start correcting the illicit market and prevent illegal sales from getting into the hands of prohibited people.

III. What makes it an ethical issue dilemma?

Several ethical dilemmas fall under the umbrella of gun control, as several factors result in today's current gun laws or lack thereof. Let's start with the legal aspect of guns in America. According to the second amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America, people have the right to keep and bear arms. I will expand more on the intricacies of this amendment later in the paper. However, for the sake of explaining the law versus ethical dilemma that gun control causes, many Americans openly carry guns not because it is necessary, but because it is their legal right. As discussed throughout this Ethics class, some actions are lawful but not ethical. I firmly believe that the open carrying of firearms is an action that lies within both the legal sphere and the ethics sphere.

Secondly, as discussed in the previous section, unlicensed gun dealers are selling guns to people who should never have access to weapons. These people include criminals, adolescents, gang members, as well as mental health patients. The latter is continuously discussed in the media, as mental health awareness becomes more of a hot topic. News coverage labels many mass shooters as people who suffer from mental disorders. This type of coverage creates a stigma against individuals with mental health issues when, in fact, numerous mass shooters do

not suffer from any mental disorders and their attacks are often thoroughly planned. (Yelderman, Joseph, West., & Butler 2019) The belief that mass shootings are random and perpetrated by mentally ill individuals is common. As a result, an avoidable fear of mental illness ensues. It should not become a norm to pair mental illness with mass shootings because mental illness is a common condition that many people suffer from, yet who have no intent to harm others.

Moreover, ethical dilemmas in the sphere of politics must be taken into consideration when it comes to gun reform. The Senate has the power to make changes to gun control bills. However, many politicians are loyal to the National Rifle Association (NRA) because of the NRA's monetary support of numerous political campaigns. The NRA argues that gun control is a threat to personal freedom because, without guns, individuals would be unable to protect against potential government tyranny. (Lancombe, Howat & Rothschild, 2019) I understand that NRA affiliates are adamant about the potential threat of government tyranny. However, the lack of political action on gun control is putting the lives of American citizens at stake. Politicians should not allow partnerships with an association to dictate their response to critical issues.

IV. Trace the cultural shifts over time to the public perception of this issue?

Gun culture is embedded deep into America's history and originated when the fight against British rule over the Thirteen Colonies began in the 1700s. Therefore, we will find that gun ownership was prominent in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The second amendment was ratified in 1791, declaring that a well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed. Gun manufacturing began to increase due to war and military expansion. As a result, gun culture grew

with the gun industry and as the United States government worked to arm its citizens, it scrambled to find sources of weapons to fulfill the mandate of the Second Amendment.

(Bellesiles, 1996)

Fast-forwarding to the 21st century, American's views on guns have evolved and there are diverse opinions on the topic. Advocates of stronger gun control identify what they consider a disturbing pattern of attitudes toward the use of firearms and their association with violence and death. Gun rights supporters consider their opposers to have an irrational fear of guns and a tendency to view firearms as evil forces independent of the individuals yielding them. (Utter & True, 2004)

V. What scriptural or philosophical approaches are applicable/helpful when addressing this issue?

Gun control was not an issue in biblical times because guns did not exist. There were other weapons used during that era, but God's stance on causing harm to others has always been clear. For starters, the 6th commandment instructs us not to kill. Anyone who uses a weapon to hurt someone deliberately is going against God's laws. Additionally, Leviticus 19:18 states, "love your neighbor as yourself." Many similar scriptures in the Bible promote love and peace. Guns typically do not support these notions.

In contrast, the scriptures do not prohibit carrying a weapon for self-defense, as numerous wars and battles took place in the Bible where swords were involved. The Bible also instructs Christians to abide by the law of the land. Romans 13:1-2 says, "Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have

been placed there by God.” Because the second amendment allows the right to bear arms, the scripture in Romans suggests that citizens should abide by the law until it is changed.

VI. Are there any social or contextual issues that have to be considered when evaluating this issue?

Although folks like to focus on mental illness when discussing gun control, one social issue that is not highlighted enough is domestic terrorism executed by white supremacists. Many of the mass shooters that are taken into custody express their hate for various minority groups and how it drove them to commit heinous acts of terrorism. Terrorists such as a Dylan Roof, who shot nine African American churchgoers in 2015 and Patrick Crusius who carried out the El Paso Walmart shooting earlier this year using a WASR-10, took multiple lives in the name of hate. Cases such as these two exemplify the inherent goal of a typical domestic terrorist, to promote political objectives by utilizing violence to generate fear and anxiety within a specific collective, regardless of the existence or absence of premeditation. (Sweeney & Perliger, A. 2018)

Individuals with such motives should never have access to guns, but unfortunately, they do have access based on our current lack of gun control.

VII. What is your position on this issue?

Early last month, my husband and I celebrated our second wedding anniversary. He expressed that he wanted to do something new and adventurous to commemorate the special occasion. After a few google searches, I found a gun range, Range 129 in Absecon, New Jersey. My husband was not aware of the special surprise I planned, so he grew very excited once he realized where we were. I surprisingly felt anxiety starting to arise. I thought it would have been

an exciting moment, especially since it is an experience I have always wanted to try. However, the resounding bangs I repeatedly heard from the lobby put me on edge.

After a thorough tutorial on how to load the bullets, handle the firearm safely and adequately pull the trigger, we were allowed to enter the range. I stepped into a room with a dozen strangers with guns in their hands, expeditiously running through their magazines. After I hit the target a few times, I decided to stop and observe my husband from the sidelines as he finished the rest of the ammunition. I couldn't help but think about all of the mass shootings that have occurred in this country in recent years. Thankfully we were in a controlled environment, but how can one know the intentions of a stranger? What if someone turned around and decided to start shooting at us? These are the fears that were running through my mind. I thoroughly believe that many people fear guns in America now more than ever. It is not necessarily the gun that is dangerous, but it is the person behind the weapon that certainly can be. If the government focuses more on restricting access from prohibited people, I would feel more comfortable about gun usage in this country.

There have been a total of 78 public mass shootings in the United States in the 30 years between 1983 to 2013 and an additional 376 incidents of firearms discharging a live round inside or into a school since 2013. (Sam, Mosher, Hook, Captari, Aten, Davis, & Campbell, 2019) As a parent, my fears of something happening to my daughter while she is in school have never been higher. From the Sandy Hook shooting, where twenty children between the ages of six and seven years old lost their lives to the Parkland High School shooting of 2018, it is becoming evident that children are not safe under the current gun laws that are in place. If policymakers have no

one else in mind while discussing gun reform, they should at least consider the threat to the lives of innocent children. Something has got to change. If my company had to take a stance in this matter, I would lead them to follow in the footsteps of the 145 businesses mentioned above, who signed a letter to urge the Senate to enact gun control bills.

On the other hand, I am not totally against guns. People use them for security, hunting, sporting and other instances. Being at the gun range had some positive aspects. It taught me a lot of valuable information on how to protect myself if needed. It is not realistic to think that guns will vanish from society. However, I believe it is quite practical to implement laws that will make sure people receive proper background checks before guns make their way into the hands of individuals seeking to harm others.

VIII. What negative consequences might you face for the position you have taken?

There are still some businesses that openly sell guns with few restrictions and allow customers to have high access to firearms. Therefore, from a business aspect, my stance on gun control may cause other companies who support the current gun laws to refrain from collaborating with me. Also, potential customers who advocate for guns may steer away from patronizing with my company.

On a personal level, I have encountered discourse from others who have opposing views. As previously stated, people who advocate for guns usually have a strong stance on the issue. However, I do not see discourse as a consequence. Debates are a part of human nature and having tough discussions is the only way to incite change.

IX. What remaining questions/concerns do you think need more consideration to develop a robust response to this emerging issue?

It would be remiss of me if I did not touch on the use of semi-automatic versus automatic firearms. One important issue is how the weapon's rate of fire affects performance. (Biggs, 2017) Many of the mass shootings we see that take place are carried out by automatic weapons and result in many more deaths at a rapid rate. If automatic weapons were removed completely from the market, I believe we'd see less harm done in society. This should definitely be considered as well when new legislation is discussed.

In regards to the second amendment, there is not as much of a need for homeland militia gun protection since wars in recent centuries have not been on American soil. Therefore, I believe that the U.S. government should strongly consider ratifying the second amendment since we are living in a completely different society from when this amendment was first implemented.

In conclusion, there is an overwhelming amount of unrestricted access to guns in the United States. Looking at the blueprint laid by other countries, it is evident that gun control is quite feasible. Take Europe for instance, 1 more person is killed with guns in the United States in a typical week than in all of western Europe in a year. (Bellesiles, 1996) In order to see significant change, there should be universal gun control laws in place that overrule the current state laws. At that point, we may see less harm done by guns in this country.

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