

## What Makes Gun Violence a Difficult Issue

The gun debate is difficult to talk about because it has become a highly emotionally topic. Two of the biggest reasons for that is one's sense of personal safety is relative to one's world view and secondly, any time you try to take away something from someone it can be viewed as an attack on their personal freedom.

What I attempt to do in this document is to use principals from social psychology to explain this in greater detail.

### **Fear, fun, money, and politics**

Part of what makes gun control a complex issue is the fact there are many special interest groups involved, each with their own agenda. There are ..

- those who see guns as a hobby,
- those who like to hunt or shoot for sport and see such activities as a family tradition
- those that see guns as a money-making opportunity,
- those that see guns as a right and a symbol of their freedom,
- those that are fearful for their personal safety (or the safety of others) and want to be in control of providing their own protection,
- those who may feel powerful weapons in the hands of citizenry are necessary to guard against a tyrannical government.

### **Core beliefs**

We are remarkable beings able to operate in a world of imperfect and sometimes conflicting information. On the most basic level, we use intuition to transform the emotions we feel into beliefs and actions.

Intuition and experience form the basis for most of what we believe. Reason and logic are also used but to a lesser extent. In fact, reason is often used to validate what we already believe as true on an emotional level.

Most people have limited time to research the complexity of modern day issues, so people rely heavily on the opinion of individuals or sources they have learned to trust.

Over time each person develops a set of core beliefs upon which new potential beliefs are evaluated. *Coherence Theory* explains how this works.

People only believe things that "coheres" or is consistent with other things they already believe. Any new potential belief that challenges an existing belief creates a psychological discomfort (*cognitive dissonance*) until the conflict is resolved by either throwing out the new belief or changing existing beliefs so that everything is consistent again.

Because we are emotionally invested in many of our social, religious, and political beliefs, the process of changing core beliefs can be very disruptive. Therefore, there is a natural tendency to only notice information that confirms one's beliefs and ignore information that disconfirms them. This tendency is called *confirmation bias*.

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Although a biased search for knowledge can sometimes prevent us from knowing the truth, it also prevents wasted effort to disprove what you already firmly believe to be false.

When the issues are difficult to understand, opinions vary widely, and there is a general distrust of information sources, cognitive dissonance may force one to isolate or distract oneself from thinking about the issue at all or instead become so deeply entrenched in their current beliefs, they shut off all debate.

### **Fear**

Fear is one of the strongest emotions. It is triggered if one feels their personal safety is threatened. Therefore, the need to protect ourselves and feel safe will always be a highly emotional topic requiring the need for immediate action (or at least the decision not to).

Fear can originate from a variety of sources. When we peer over the edge of a cliff, we may become instinctively fearful that we may fall off. This is a situation that needs no evaluation. We respond immediately by backing away from the edge.

We can also become frightened if others appear frightened or tell us we are in danger. Even though the fear may be baseless, we may choose to err on the side of caution and accept the warnings as valid and do something extraordinary to protect oneself.

Fear can even make someone shy away from actively advocating for common sense gun laws for fear of having to confront angry armed pro-gun activists.

Normal fears can become magnified by one's disposition, anxiety about the future, unfounded mistrust of others, obsessive behaviors, and general lack of empathy.

Because of the power and influence fear has over us, we can be easily exploited by politicians looking for votes and manufactures and dealers looking for profit making opportunities.

### **The need to feel safe**

To many, owning a gun makes them feel safe because they are in control of their own protection. Although this may have been true in the wild west, in modern society owning a gun increases your risk of injury (or someone you love). But fear, stoked by even one anecdotal example or an imagined situation can overshadow this rational argument.

How do you remain ready in case that imagined situation becomes a reality? Must you carry a loaded firearm everywhere you go? Must you lay it on your night stand while you sleep? All the time you are making a deadly weapon available for others to steal, use on themselves, or you or discharge accidentally. And should encounter such a situation, will you have enough time to recognize the danger and then figure out how to react to it. Perhaps this vigilance was necessary at one time in our country's history. For most people in the United States today, it is not.

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### Loss of freedom

Many responsible, safety conscious gun owners may wonder why they need to be affected by rigorous laws that limit their freedom to easily buy or own guns. The simple answer is that laws are not created for those that keep them, they are written for those that don't.

This same situation is found throughout modern day life. Casinos, for instance provide an opportunity for the thrill of winning and losing and yet has the ability to destroy the lives of those who can't gamble responsibly. In this instance, society has said casinos are allowed and it is up to each individual to gamble in a responsible manner but places restrictions on the age at which someone can participate.

The controls placed on alcoholic beverages is another example. Alcohol, when used in moderation, can provide relaxation and be a 'social lubricant.' In this instance society permits alcohol consumption but puts limits on age and provides harsh penalties for things like drunken driving. In an effort to save lives, national prohibition was once attempted but failed.

In each example above, the tradeoffs were weighed, and a balance was struck between freedom to act and what may be called the 'common good.'

In the case of gun control how many lives are worth the freedom to easily purchase and own assault weapons?

### A difficult road ahead

The recently created gun culture has been fueled by a 2008 reinterpretation of the Second Amendment, politicians looking for votes, and manufactures and sellers looking for profits.

It is a difficult task to convince those who base their need for guns on fear or see guns as a symbol of their freedom. For these groups, it may be that no number of 'facts,' studies, or risk assessments that will sway them until their core beliefs are changed.

If movement is to be made towards greater gun control, it's going to require a battle of "hearts and minds" in which attitudes about gun ownership are gradually transformed.

Several things could make acceptance of new ideas possible. A negative gun experience or a gun related tragedy that affects someone they love may increase one's empathy for their fellow man allowing them to feel what it's like to experience a gun related tragedy.

Secondly, the use of analogies that point to already accepted core beliefs may make assimilation of the new ideas easier.

There is hope. Some estimates put gun ownership at only 25% of the population and although the number of guns in circulation keep rising, gun ownership is declining. We need to elect legislators that will enact common sense legislation. The only way that is going to happen is to make more noise than the Second Amendment fundamentalists.