

Guest Column: Understanding the Social Life of Guns

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In June 2017, the Pew Research Center reported that 70% of American adults have fired a gun at some point in their lives. That is nearly 180 million people. Looked at the other way around: A minority of American adults have never shot a gun. Like many sociologists, I was in that minority for most of my life. Consequently, until six years ago when I began studying guns, I had no idea how common and normal they are in the United States.

Seeing guns and gun ownership as normal contrasts sharply with the views of my fellow sociologists. When I tell colleagues I am studying “gun culture,” they frequently hear me saying “gun violence,” since their primary association with guns is with deviant behavior. Or they will respond, “Good, more people need to be studying gun control,” betraying the primacy of their political views over their desire for greater empirical understanding. It falls too far outside their experience with and understanding of guns to think of them in any way other than negatively. I understand this point of view, because for the first 20 years of my academic career, I shared this stance towards guns. But what can an approach to guns that recognizes their normality rather than their pathology do for medical sociologists?

Although it falls outside the scope of medical sociology proper, those considering studying guns in connection with health, illness, and injury do well to bear in mind that, on any given day in America, the vast majority of gun owners will not have any negative outcomes associated with their guns.

The best available estimates suggest that there are at least 300 million privately owned guns in some 50 million households in the U.S. today. According to the NCHS, in 2014 there were 11,008 homicides using firearms. Even using the faulty assumption that a person from a different household committed every homicide using a different gun, at most 0.022% of gun-owning house-

holds and 0.0037% of guns are “responsible” for firearms homicides. Looked at the other way around, at least 99.978% of gun owning households and 99.996% of guns are not involved in homicide in any given year. Even if we add non-fatal firearms injuries (73,505 in 2013) and suicides (21,386 in 2014), only 0.035% of guns and 0.21% of gun-owning households at most are “responsible.” Less than 99.965% of guns and 99.788% of gun-owning households are associated with any of these negative outcomes.

It is true that the firearms homicide, suicide, and injury rates in the U.S. are higher than some other countries that afford their citizens less freedom and responsibility in this area. But it is also true that the overwhelming majority of American citizens who exercise this freedom do so responsibly. Just like the vast majority who exercise the rights to free speech and religious practice do so responsibly. Gun ownership overall certainly compares favorably in terms of public health to alcohol consumption – more commonly experienced, better understood, and consequently less criticized by sociologists – even though the same principle that a small number of abusers are responsible for the vast majority of the problems applies.

Some compare the number of vehicular deaths annually to the number of firearms deaths, but this comparison is faulty. The 37,195 vehicular deaths reported by the NCHS in 2014 are in the “unintentional” category. Only 461 firearms deaths in 2014 are categorized as unintentional. The overwhelming majority of people who die from gunshot wounds are shot intentionally, by themselves or others. This intentionality shifts attention to understanding how other factors are necessary for guns to have a lethal or injurious effect. I actually wrote this essay with a 9mm Glock 43 auto-pistol sitting next to me just to verify that it is in fact an inanimate object with no capacity to act on its own.

One need not accept the NRA mantra that “guns don’t kill people, people kill people” to recognize that as inanimate objects guns are not an independent risk factor for death or injury. Although we can control for other factors to artificially isolate guns in statistical models, *ceteris paribus* exists only in our computers. In the real world, all other things are not equal.

Like many health disparities, the reality is that certain people with guns kill or injure themselves or other people more often under certain circumstances. This is a lot harder to think about and study than a myopic focus on guns themselves, which necessarily implicates the vast majority of guns and gun owners who are in no way involved in firearms deaths or injuries and never will be.

The vast majority of sociologists I have met are not gun people and so, like the younger me, have no appreciation of the complex social reality of guns. My hope is that understanding the normality and innocuousness of the vast majority of guns and gun owners will make studies of the modest amount deviant behavior committed with guns more sensitive and sophisticated.

This gets at the truth highlighted by the old joke: How many sociologists does it take to change a lightbulb? Four. One to change the bulb and three to explain the root causes of darkness. Especially in a country of 300 million mostly innocuous guns and in 50 million mostly normal, law-abiding gun-owning households, we do well to focus on the root causes of injury and death rather than a tool that has no life of its own.