

Transcript Policy 360 Episode 51

Kelly Brownell: Hello and welcome once again to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

We are recording this interview three days after the news that a gunman has perpetrated the deadliest mass shooting in modern American history, with 58 deaths thus far and 500 injured in Las Vegas.

News reporter: we are following breaking news for you. The deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history has happened. It happened last night at an outdoor country music festival on the Las Vegas strip. Male announcer: the images are hard to shake. A night out, turned into a nightmare. Female announcer: Another mass shooting in America. At 10:08 p.m. in Las Vegas, a grim new record is about to be set. The most-deadly mass shooting, ever.

Our hearts go out to all of those affected by the violence.

These types of shootings are becoming numbingly familiar in the U.S.

- 49 dead in the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando.
- 32 killed at Virginia Tech
- 28 dead including 20 children ages 6 and 7 at Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut.

And the list goes on and on.

Today we welcome Kristin Goss to our program. Kristen has written several books relevant to this issue, one entitles Disarmed: The Missing Movement for Gun Control in America and another, co-authored with colleague Philip Cook entitled The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know.

She is the Kevin D. Gorter Associate Professor of Public Policy at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke. Kristin, welcome to the program.

I thought today we would explore why- to date - the U.S. lacks a comprehensive gun control policy and where do you see things going. So, your book on the missing movement for gun control in America was published a decade ago. What inspired you to write that book?

Goss: So, that book came out of a mass shooting, one that was especially deadly and especially shocking at the time, which was the shooting at Columbine High School in my hometown of Denver Colorado.

And it occurred to me at the time - I had done some work earlier on gun violence in urban areas, we were coming off a national epidemic of gun violence largely in urban areas and I had been looking at sort of grassroots efforts by moms and very small volunteer groups to try to stem the tide, and had noticed that they were really under resourced and really struggling.

So, after Columbine I thought it would be interesting to take a more thorough look at the state of what then was called the "gun control movement" now called "the gun violence prevention movement."

And it struck me that there was an easy answer to why the gun control movement was weak and that was that their opponents, namely the National Rifle Association, was so strong. And I certainly do not dispute that the NRA is an incredibly powerful political organization. There are many reasons for that.

I thought that wasn't the full story. So, I likened it to a football game. So, if you want to know why one team wins a lot it could be because that team is really good, but it could also be that their opponents are weak. And I was interested in exploring the weakness on the gun control side.

Brownell: So, the weakness of the movement - what do you attribute that to?

Goss: So, what I did with that research is - I looked at sort of the problem that the gun control movement had to solve, which was to gain a mass following among people who, for the most part, are unlikely to be killed.

We have a terrible murder epidemic in this country, but you know for any individual the chances of being shot and killed by a gun is relatively small. And they had to organize around a public policy that would regulate or restrict potentially other people's freedom.

So, we do that all the time in public policy, it's indeed part of government's job is to rein in you know unfettered freedom for some in the interest of a public good (speed limits would be an example.) But that turns out to be a very tricky thing in a country that really loves its freedom and rightly so.

So, I compared the gun control groups to a number of other groups that, to my eye, had developed really strong movements and were at the same time trying to sort of regulate individual freedom around the edges in the interests of some public good.

So, I sort of came up with three differences - maybe the magic formula that these other movements had discovered that the gun control groups had not.

The first was that these other groups had outside sources of institutional support. So-- we all - we think we think of social movements as just bubbling up from the ground and they're spontaneous and people come together to work for change. And that's not really the way social movements work. They typically have outside sources of money, they have institutions that they can build around. So, think about the civil rights movement working with through African-American churches and historically black colleges and universities. And the gun control groups for a variety of reasons just did not have these kinds of steady sources of outside support.

The organizations also really had not sort of found a values-based language for talking about their cause in a way that would really inspire action and would make people really relate to what they were doing. The NRA, on the other hand, had discovered a language that was really powerful, that resonated with our national values of liberty and freedom and patriotism and individualism and so forth.

And I think probably the most important explanation that I found in that book was that the gun control movement had essentially -- when it when it started forming in the 70s -- this was a time when big government solutions were sort of had been in vogue but were sort of starting to become discredited.

And gun control groups very early on decided to go very big and bold with their policy proposals - so national handgun bans and things like that.

And in my reading of history that's not typically the way policy is made. Typically, a policy is made more incrementally from the state or local level up to the federal level and more incrementally in terms of the reach of the policy. And I think essentially the gun control movement sort of overshot in a sense, no pun intended, and got the gun rights folks to be very defensive, and you know helped propel them into a more sort of hardline political stance that we're still living with today.

Brownell: So, Kristen, this strikes me as something where there are many public health parallels. So, people are losing their lives because of guns, so certainly help is affected. And with public health there are typical ways our country moves ahead. So just to take this table, there's a glass of water sitting in front of me and I'm expecting that water to be safe. It has come from a drinking tap somewhere because we have ceded the government the authority to create a safe environment in which you and I

exist. Take tobacco for example - so you could say OK, you know that's fine, it's easy, there are no opponents there's no big industry involved, so having clean water is a pretty straightforward lift. Take tobacco though, where that wasn't the case. A massive industry with massive political influence. They claim that individual rights made - gave people choice about whether to smoke or not and the government stepped in and did a lot of things including taxing cigarettes in a sky-high way which really affected consumption. So -- what's different about guns?

Goss: It's a great question. And Kelly you would probably know more than I do about this, but my reading of the history of the tobacco movement is there are some parallels and there are some dissimilarities So the basic project is the same in that they're trying to sort of limit or tax unhealthy behavior in the interest of the public good.

The anti-tobacco movement, there were actually two. There was one in the early 20th century and then there was the modern one that we're familiar with.

And it seems to me that the anti-tobacco forces in the modern movement certainly had a number of things on their side. So, first they had government support early on. So, the surgeon general gave his imprimatur in the early 1960s to the proposition that smoking kills you. A series of other reports said that not only does smoking kill you, it also severely affects the health of those around you. And so, there was credible scientific research backed in some cases by money and other things that government can do to sort of support movements.

The anti-tobacco movement also, it really became a broader movement when the movements started talking about the effect on children. And it was really interesting as I was looking at the history of all these different movements for what we call social regulation, that they all eventually came around to making this argument that whatever the practice was affecting kid. And that was the -- that was the framing that really helped make the restriction of adult liberty a little bit more palatable politically.

The other difference between the two is that, and here we'll flip to the anti-regulation side. The tobacco companies were certainly powerful and moneyed interests, but they did not have a riled-up base. So, people enjoyed smoking but they weren't going to organize collectively and storm their members of Congress's offices as a mass movement to fight against higher tobacco taxes, for example.

The pro-gun rights folks are extremely well organized locally, at the state level, and at the federal level. In other words, their organization matches the way our governments are organized. They see each other regularly. I mean shooting guns is a recreational activity for millions of people - it's fun. And they have natural places to come together at gun shows, at gun ranges, out hunting where they can create strong communities and identity around firearms ownership and use and where they can spread political messages about threats from legislation. I think with smoking there wasn't that parallel organization of everyday individuals who were consuming cigarettes. And I think also people love their guns more than smokers love their cigarettes.

Brownell: It could be but people were heavily addicted to cigarettes and so there was a heavy draw in that sense. You know it's interesting the child parallel what you drew, and I wonder if that doesn't help kind of open the door to reform in gun legislation. You know with Sandy Hook occurring and then lots of kids getting killed accidentally with guns. You know whether at some point that will help move the movement forward. OK, but let's fast forward, so you talked about 10 years ago there wasn't a sufficient movement, but what would you think is occurring now, what's happening now?

Goss: So there are some "Groundhog Day"-like aspects to this issue where you have a terrible shooting. People get really upset. There are calls for Congress to do something to pass a law. Money flows in from everyday people and from wealthy people. Congress maybe discusses it, but doesn't pass whatever the proposal is - typically it's been a universal background check proposal. So, you know you can see the same thing happening after Columbine that happened after Sandy Hook. I mean it's eerie.

That said I think that there's there has been a pretty important shift among gun policy reformers since

I started doing this research in the late 90s and early 2000s. And I would say three things are really different.

So first of all, there's a lot more money in the gun control movement now (or gun violence prevention movement) than there was then and it's sustained. So, I look at Michael Bloomberg, former mayor of New York, is really concerned about this issue and he along with some other mayors founded an organization in 2006 and got started in 2007 and that organization which has now called Every Town for Gun Safety has merged with an organization of mothers that started after Sandy Hook to become a real powerhouse in the gun control movement space. So that organization's revenues - budget - has increased nearly 15-fold since 2010. There are a lot more players that are involved in this movement now and they're meeting regularly, they're networked, they're figuring out who's going to do what. I think the rancor that used to be at the heart of the movement has abated quite a bit.

So, there's a lot more money there's new players and to your point, Kelly, the moms are talking in you know very child-centered terms. I mean that is how they are framing this this issue. And they are really active. I'm old-school political participation. I believe in face to face organizations that have deep democracy but I'm really coming around to seeing how online media including social media Facebook and so forth are allowing people who otherwise might not be able to find each other or to really build a strong sense of community and purpose for their movement are able to do that across space and time through Facebook and to a lesser extent through Twitter. Now they're working off-line as well which is the key too. But there's a sort of community building that social media are allowing now that just wasn't the case when I you know after Columbine when the Internet was a very young tool.

Brownell: So this is any signs that this is having a tangible impact?

Goss: Well so I think the easy narrative about gun violence prevention or gun control is that, you know, terrible things happen and Congress does nothing and that's pretty true. But law enforcement is generally a state-level issue and there's been a lot of movement at the state level that goes under the radar.

So, I did a piece a couple of years ago about laws that are aimed at limiting gun access to people with severe mental illness. I counted something like 80 laws that had passed over a decade period from 2004 to 2014 in 40 states and the majority of those were tightening those restrictions. So, mental health is one area where there's been a lot of movement at the state level.

Domestic violence is another one. So, we have a graduate student who is who is counting those laws. And these are laws that are - that are - you know the National Rifle Association is signing off on. It's all done very quietly behind the scenes. But there is movement. More states have background checks now than when I started doing this research 15 or 20 years ago. So, we have a national background check law for official sales or official dealers like Wal-Mart or Joe's Gun Store. But private sales are not regulated federally so that's falling to the states and those -every year another state or so adds a background check law for private sales. So, it's not the majority of states but there's movement there.

Brownell: So, If you think about a two-by-two grid that would list things that would have low impact on gun violence going to high impact and you'd cross that with which things are politically feasible. How would you populate the grid? I mean what are the things that you think would be most impactful and then separate from that would you think would be most feasible?

Goss: So, that's a great question. And you know - gun violence is an interesting issue in the sense that it is so prominent and the U.S. is such an outlier, yet the research on gun violence is not nearly as evolved or - and gun control laws is not nearly as evolved as we would all like.

And gun violence has many different problems with many different sources, so it's not like there's one law that's going to solve all problems. So a law that might help with these high-profile mass shootings might not help with street violence in you know over drug deals or something like that.

I think if you're if you're asking me what's feasible and what should what I think is going to show some real promise, the gun violence prevention movement has gotten really smart about looking at research and there is a new policy tool that's starting to be rolled out in the states and introduced in a number of states without having been enacted yet called a gun violence restraining order or an extreme-risk protection order. And what these do is essentially allow family members or household members of people who have guns and are exhibiting potentially dangerous behavior to petition a civil court to remove that gun from the home for a set period of time and to bar that individual from buying another gun while that gun is removed and while that order is in place. And there are due process regulations to allow the court to restore gun ownership. But essentially, we have something like -- we don't even know -- 300 million guns in this country. Gun ownership is widespread.

There's never going to be you know -- even if we wanted it which you know most of us don't -- you know mass confiscation firearms is never going to happen. And so, I think that that actually to deal with this problem and we're going to have to kind of rely on each other to some extent we're going to have to empower individuals to be able to separate dangerous people from firearms. And this is one - you know it's new it hasn't been evaluated yet. The first one was enacted and went into effect in California in 2016. So, we don't know if it's going to work yet but it's something that I think people are having a lot of faith that could show some results and it might actually be useful for these kinds of mass shootings in particular. In other.

The other thing that I think is showing a lot of promises these domestic violence laws. So, there are at the federal level there are laws that say that you know if you're a domestic abuser, meaning in certain sort of categories you're not allowed to own or purchase a gun. But as a practical matter the federal government, The Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms is not going to enforce this law. They don't have enough people, it's not really their job. It's the local authorities that enforce these kinds of laws. So, what that means is you need a state law that parallels the national law.

And a lot of states don't have it or they don't enforce it. Or they'll say - they'll pass a law that says you know domestic abusers can't have a gun but they don't have any mechanism of going and getting the gun once they the person has been convicted of a misdemeanor. So, there are patches in the implementation of these laws. And we know that a lot of these mass shootings and you know a lot of the collateral damage that is resulting from this single shooting originate in domestic violence situations. So - wife leaves husband, husband gets upset, goes to wife's workplace and shoots wife and five of her coworkers, things like that. So, Sandy Hook started as a domestic murder, right? Adam Lanza killed his mother before he went to school, the school. So, I have the feeling that that you know getting a handle on the domestic violence situation might actually have a ripple effect on other kinds of gun fatalities.

Brownell: Kristin, you tell a story in your book about your dad and what turned out to be the last week of his life. He read the draft of one of your books, *Disarmed*. He was a military veteran and a passionate gun rights supporter. He also lived just five miles from Columbine High School. Can you tell us about that discussion with your dad?

Goss: Yeah. So, my dad grew up on a farm in western Colorado. I mean there were guns everywhere as there needed to be. He was in the military. He was a conservative. He believed that firearms were fundamental to protecting our democratic freedoms. He owned a gun. But he was also a dad. And when Columbine happened, that that high school was very similar to the high school I went to, just a little bit you know down the road more or less. And he was horrified by this.

And shortly after Columbine happened, which was in 1999, the following year, the following election cycle, Colorado put on the ballot a measure to require background checks at gun shows essentially. And so, it was a popular vote. It was not the Colorado legislature voting. And I remember calling my dad on Election Day and saying, "How did you vote on that?" And he said, "I voted for it." And I thought "Wow, my dad voted for gun control this thing's going to pass." And I said, "Well, Dad, why did you vote for it?" And he said, "I don't know, we ought to do something."

And I always think about my dad when I think about the bitter politics of this issue and how it's become sort of - how firearms have become so central to people's identity and how hard it is to you know to regulate something that's fundamental to someone's identity.

There's actually a pretty strong parallel I think between how pro-choice women feel about anti-abortion legislation and how pro-gun people feel about gun control legislation. You know, they both involve bodily identity and bodily sovereignty and so forth.

But then I also think, "Gosh if my dad could see a simple background check law as something that isn't going to lead to mass confiscation, and fascism in America, that are probably a lot of other gun owners out there who could meet the gun control side halfway." It's just that our politics plays out at an elite level where there are a lot of interests and being extreme and more extreme than the average person who might be your sympathizer.

Brownell: So, what happened with that popular vote?

Goss: It passed overwhelmingly.

Brownell: Well Kristin thank you so much for joining us today and thank you for the very high-quality work you've done on this topic over a number of years. And you know when you see these kind of mass shootings you see how much is at stake. So, we're very grateful for what you do. Thank you.

Goss: Thank you.