

The Role of Public Administration in Gun Violence and Mass Shootings  
Alex Hinton  
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## Introduction

In October 2017, the United States was once again ravaged by a mass shooting, this time in Las Vegas, Nevada. Counting the aftermath, it has been deemed the deadliest single act of gun violence in US history: 58 people were killed, and 489 were injured. As a result of this tragedy, national debate has once again turned to the issue of gun control inside the United States. On the right-hand side of politics, advocates call for increased funding for mental health treatment; and on the left-hand side, activists have an increased amount of evidence to push for stricter gun control laws. With the advent of this tragedy, public administrators at all levels must consider the issue at hand—and they best way to deal with it.

## The Problem

At first look, the issue plaguing the country is a dramatic increase in the amount of mass shootings. One of the most prominent mass shootings in US history was in 2011 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut. Even though the United States has the most mass shootings in the world (WSJ 2017), little change in policy has come.

With this in mind, it is important to shift our focus on exactly *what* the problem facing our country is. I will define the problem as a reluctance to *engage* in change on all levels of governance—from grassroots efforts to the Federal legislature. This largely takes the form of an opposition to compromise—thus a reluctance to engage in policy change—as it comes to either stricter gun laws or tangible changes in mental health policy.

## The Symptoms

There are many symptoms that point to this greater problem of unwillingness to engage in policy change. There are obvious symptoms, such as an increase in mass shootings within the US—or maybe more broadly the continued issue of gun violence. There are also more hidden symptoms that point to the apathy of civil engagement. Between citizens there is an increased distrust. Often after a mass shooting, gun sales tend to increase as citizens worry about their own safety. In addition to this increased distrust between citizens, distrust in the ability of the government to affect a policy change in the area of safety from gun violence grows as well. As a result, the public is growing more apathetic to the issue, accepting it as a part of the US culture rather than seeing mass shootings as a problem that *can* be fixed. However, this apathy is understandable. Although in the time period immediately surrounding the shooting there is a high level of public support for change, as time goes on the opportunity to mobilize a change in policy is lost. Resultantly, the issue loses its primacy in the public consciousness as time progresses; thus, there is little motivation to change policy from citizens and policy makers due to an apathy that comes from distance from the event.

All of these may be considered symptoms of the greater issue of a lack of administrative and civic engagement. As a public administrator, we must look to the different actors within the political system in order to understand how to affect a positive change in both these symptoms and the problem to which they point.

## Key Actors

In an issue like gun violence, especially mass shootings, there are actors on every level of governance: federal, state, and local. They can take the form of legislators, lobbyists, city council members, police officers, grassroots activists, non-profit organizations, and even political parties. For simplicity's sake, we will deal primarily with state and federal legislators and political parties, as they have much of the power when it comes to affecting change in a more short-term perspective.

There are several considerations to keep in mind when viewing the issue of policy change—especially gun policy change—from the viewpoint of an elected official. First, elected officials are almost always averse to risky behaviors. If there is a policy that might negatively affect their probability of getting re-elected or appointed to a higher position, it is unlikely the legislator will take that specific course of action. This changes when the legislator's motives are *affective* and they believe the program is beneficial and needed, regardless of its effects on their prospects for reelection to their position. Second, legislators must take into consideration the policymaking process. If pushing a bill to affect a change in gun policy, or mental health policy for that matter, would not amount to anything, the legislator's efforts

may be better spent advocating for legislation that is more likely to pass Congress. Third, a policy maker must take into consideration any legal implications. For gun control, one would need to take into consideration Second Amendment rights, as well as any other laws that affirm that amendment. For any health-based legislation, one would need to take into consideration the legal and political implications of expanding healthcare rights. In short, it would be costly, time-consuming, and politically difficult. Finally, a legislator would need to take into consideration the economic implications for any change in policy. Legislation that affects any sort of change in gun policy or mental health policy would have severe economic implications, due to a need to be adequately funded, have adequately trained and trustworthy agents (*principal-agent issue*), and a likely need for a public relations campaign in order to affect a change in public opinion.

The political party of policy makers plays a huge role in these determinant factors of a specific actor's position. In relation to the two largest American political parties—the Republican party and Democratic party—the issue of mass shootings comes down to two *discussed* policy options. The options are typically boiled down to either having stricter gun control laws, having more access to treatment for mental health issues, or a combination of the two. Republicans tend to err on the side of advocating for mental health treatment, and Democrats tend to err on the side of stricter gun control laws. This is not to say *all* Democrats and *all* Republicans hold these positions, but a large portion of the party leadership does.

To sum the positions of policy makers and legislators would be lengthy and difficult, if only due to the large number of state and federal lawmakers in the United States. As such, we can infer by party membership the stances and positions policy makers may have on the issue with few exceptions. At a time where divisiveness is prevalent in the nation, we may also infer the reluctance to engage in a certain level of compromising policymaking long after the event is over is due to the political riskiness of issues concerning guns—especially in the United States. Additionally, the issue of guns, gun control, and the expansion of healthcare rights in the US is exceptionally divisive: advocating for these policy changes outside the immediate sphere of urgency the initial events create may in fact make the situation worse.

### **The Solution**

The issue of gun violence, mass shootings, and divisive political discourse—and the apathy policy makers and citizens alike have for solving these problems—is *not* going to be fixed through inaction. Any solution that arises may only be considered a solution if it actively seeks and succeeds to fix the issue. Engagement is a necessity to affect real change in the policies surrounding mass shootings.

To say engagement is necessary to solve disengagement is a redundant statement. Logically, if one is to solve inaction, one must act. In that line of thinking, the question arises of how to effectively act in a way that produces institutional change. First, citizens must be brought out of apathy and want a change in policy. According to *Arnstein's Ladder of Participation*, this sort of pursuit may fall under the category of *manipulation*, or the use of public relations to engineer support for a change in policy. Without this, policy makers will have no incentive to propose any sort of law that addresses gun violence. Regardless of the result of the public relations campaign, it is necessary for the public to want a change in order for policy makers to want a change.

Second, after the general population has been adequately engaged in the policy change process, the public administrator should *consult* the civic population. Consultation is to discuss with citizens what they want, being careful to make sure not to give assurances that this will indeed be the policy pursued. In order to create an effective, lasting policy, all citizens from all walks of life must be involved and feel included in the policy-making process through these town hall-like events. Otherwise, apathy towards the issue will arise again, and distrust in the government will become increasingly prevalent.

At best, simply acknowledging, involving, and engaging everyday citizens with policy decisions will solve the underlying problem of unwillingness to work on an issue. Any proposed solution that comes about must have the support of the public; whether it is increased mental healthcare or increased gun control—or a mix of the two—is ultimately unimportant to the purposes of this report. Rather, simply a change, an act of compromise between a polarized public and partisan spectrum to affect a change in how the United States handles gun violence is the most important way to address the problem of civic disengagement.

## **The Challenges**

Regardless of the policy ultimately decided on, there will be challenges and blowback. In the case of a restriction of guns, there would be blowback from gun rights lobbyists, advocates (within and outside the government), and advocates for the Second Amendment. In the case of an expansion of mental healthcare, there would likely be blowback resulting from the economic cost of expanding healthcare in such a way. Likely, taxes would need to be raised—and that is, on the whole, unpopular regardless of party affiliation. In both instances, activists would likely argue that whatever the policy is, it is not doing enough to fix the issue. Additionally, if another major mass shooting happens, the policy will be criticized for not preventing another mass shooting, and debate will turn again to changing policy, or going back to old policy (which was less expensive or less restricting). In short, any policy enacted will receive blowback. No one group will be completely satisfied with the policy; the challenge will be accepting and mitigating that fact.

There is also a challenge of bureaucratic organizations disputing authority on certain issues. Deciding what agency oversees what aspects of the policy implementation will be a challenge to overcome, just as much as getting the change in policy in the first place. To ensure the most effective implementation, the public administrator in charge of the implementation should rely on experts within the different fields of focus. In the case of public health policies, use experts in public health policy and implementation. In the case of prohibitory laws, refer to other nations who have accomplished stricter gun control—as well as adequately train and supervise the agents responsible for ensuring the new law takes effect properly.

## **Future Implications**

To conclude, a success on the policy maker's end inasmuch as getting controversial policy passed at a time of extreme divisiveness, would be a great achievement and a forerunner for future successes in the administration of the American legal system. If such a success were to occur, one could study the effects a public relations campaign has on mobilizing support for a change in policy—to which future policy makers could look for guidance when another polarizing issue arises. With whatever policy that civic engagement produces, if it successfully reduces gun violence in the United States, the part in which that policy played in decreasing the crime could be studied. In the case of gun control, how to effectively prohibit an item to reduce violent crime; in the case of mental healthcare, how to effectively fund and expand a program so that it is utilized to the best of its ability. Future policy makers would be able to apply the principles learned from these issues to the issues they will face—and, with luck, will be successful in implementing the change their public needs.

## References

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