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Public Support For Stricter Gun Control Laws In America Following The Tragedy At Sandy Hook Elementary

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PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR STRICTER GUN CONTROL LAWS IN AMERICA
FOLLOWING THE TRAGEDY AT SANDY HOOK ELEMENTARY

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 2012

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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This thesis, submitted by Ryan J. Hausmann in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This thesis is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the Graduate School at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

Wayne Swisher
Dean of the Graduate School

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Title Public Support for Stricter Gun Control Laws in America Following the
 Tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary

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Ryan J. Hausmann
05-1-2014

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ABSTRACT

The past decade witnessed a considerable increase in public outrage and debates regarding gun control laws, due in large part to several mass shootings across the nation. The purpose of this study is to explore how mass shootings influence attitudes toward gun control. More specifically, this study will examine the respondents' familiarity with the 2012 mass shooting in New Town, Connecticut, and then explore their opinions about whether that shooting reflects isolated acts of troubled individuals, or whether it is a reflection of greater issues, and in turn, how those opinions influence attitudes toward gun control.

Data for this research are from the December 2012 Gun Control Survey conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International ($N = 1,219$), and logistic regression was used to test the hypotheses. The results indicate that, contrary to previous literature, familiarity with the Sandy Hook shooting had no impact on people's attitudes toward gun control. The results also show that respondents who believe that this shooting represents broader problems had significantly greater odds of favoring gun control. It is concluded that more research is needed in the area of gun control and school shootings to better understand the public's response, thereby helping to create policy recommendations that are politically feasible.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Chapter

The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of highly publicized school shootings on attitudes toward gun control. More specifically, this thesis will examine an individual's familiarity with the 2012 school shooting in New Town, Connecticut, explore their opinions about whether that shooting reflects isolated acts of troubled individuals or larger issues, and then how those opinions influence attitudes toward gun control. Chapter One introduces the topic of the thesis, including the thesis goals and the importance of attitudes toward gun control. Additionally, the researcher will provide a brief historical overview of school shootings and the four additional chapters of this thesis.

Background of the Problem

The past decade witnessed a considerable increase in public outrage and debate regarding gun control laws, due in large part to mass shootings across the nation that left many people dead and injured (Kleck, 2009). Firearm injuries and deaths in the US reached what some considered epidemic proportions in the 1980s, and have risen every year since. In fact, firearms are the second leading cause of injury and death in the nation (Murphy, Xu, & Kochanek, 2010; Thompson, Price, Dake, & Tatchell, 2006). No other industrialized country has comparable rates of mortality, morbidity, or financial costs

sustained from firearms. Even with these disturbing facts, many in the US continue to oppose gun control (Cook & Ludwig, 2003; Thompson et al., 2006).

As far back as the early 1900s, Americans have been against gun control, and it was rarely a topic of public interest. Not until the mid 1960s, starting with President Kennedy's assassination and continuing with major riots and an explosion in violent crime rates through the 1970s, did gun control become a significant issue (Smith, 1980). Since then, public opinion in favor of gun control has risen (Makarios & Pratt, 2012; Smith, 1980). Though the US has experienced an increase in support for gun control measures, that increase does not compare to the level of support in other countries. For example, people in the US score the highest in believing that citizens have the right to bear arms and that guns will provide protection during a crime, as compared to people in Great Britain and Australia (Cooke, 2004). Further, many in the US associate gun ownership with masculinity, recreation, and protection, rather than crime (Dixon & Lizotte, 1987; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010).

Today the two opposing sides to the gun control debate, anti-gun control and gun control, advance compelling arguments (Bouffard, Nobles, Wells, & Cavanaugh, 2012). Extremists who oppose gun control believe that citizens of the US have the right to possess weapons with few or no restrictions. Extremists in favor of gun control believe that only law enforcement officers should possess and carry weapons, believing that this will reduce self-inflicted injuries, suicide, and crime rates (Bouffard et al., 2012; Cook, 2013). After a horrific event, such as the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting, the gun control debate is intensified by national organizations that seek to shape attitudes and

public policy. An anti-gun control organization, Students for Concealed Carry on Campuses (SCCC), argues that increasing legally armed individuals in schools provides protection in the event of an attack. In contrast, a gun control organization called The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence (BCPGV), argues that arming students would not save lives in a mass shooting, and introducing guns into an already dangerous environment would cause more injuries and deaths (Bouffard et al., 2012).

Mass Shootings across America

Despite an increase in mass shootings, few studies examine the impact of mass shootings on attitudes toward gun control. Mass shootings before the late 1990s were extremely rare, and less violent than today. Prior to the 1920s, mass shootings were nearly non-existent (Duwe, 2004). In the late 1920s and early 30s, the nation saw a small, but significant increase in mass shootings, comprised mainly of familicides involving homicides between immediate family members. Only 50% of mass violence at that time used firearms, resulting in less victims per mass murder, with most precipitated by family issues, such as financial troubles and divorce (Duwe, 2004; McElvaine, 1993). The mass murder rate in the United States declined in the 1940s, and stayed relatively stable until the mid-1970s; however, between the 1940s and 1970s the use of firearms per mass murder rose, contributing to nearly 70 percent of all mass murders. Researchers have attributed this to the rise in the number of gun sales, crime rates, and the crack epidemic (Duwe, 2004; Smith, 1980). Additionally, before the mid-1970s, mass murder offenders were typically older, white males. The only demographic characteristic that has remained constant across the decades is that most offenders are male (Duwe, 2004; Fox & Levin,

1998).

Since the mid-1970s, mass murderers have become younger in age and span across racial groups (Duwe, 2004). Precipitating reasons have also changed. Researchers currently tend to fault bullying problems, various mental illnesses, and the nation's gun culture for these patterns (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Meloy et al., 2004). The two sides of the gun control debate try to shape the narrative, with one focusing on the isolated acts of disturbed individuals and the other on the ease with which people can obtain powerful guns (Fox & DeLateur, 2013; Kleck, 2009).

School Shootings across America

Since this study uses data collected soon after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary shooting, it is essential to recognize a subcategory of mass shootings: school shootings. Over the past three decades, this nation has suffered over thirty school shootings in which a student opened fire on classmates, school officials, and police officers (Duwe, 2004; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). School shootings before the mid 1980s were predominately carried out by young black male students at inner city schools using handguns to exact revenge on a specific target (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). Since the 1980s, political leaders allocate millions of dollars each year for schools to implement policies to prevent such tragedies (Burns & Crawford, 1999), including stationing police officers and armed security officers at schools and installing metal detectors (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). Since the early 1980s, school shooters have shifted from young black males to young white males. The characteristics of the shootings have also changed. Rather than using handguns, these young white males use semi-automatic rifles or military type assault

weapons, and the shootings are occurring in rural and suburban schools rather than inner-city urban schools. Additionally, many of the victims are selected at random, with no specific target in mind (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010). The shifting characteristics of school shootings have many scholars in the social sciences considering social isolation, bullying, suicidal ideation, low frustration tolerance, low social status, lack of resiliency, low self-esteem, anger management problems, fascination with violent entertainment, problems with gun laws, ease of access to firearms, and gun culture as underlying catalysts for mass school shootings (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Meloy et al., 2004; Meloy, Hempel, Mohandie, Shiva, & Gray, 2001). These characteristics are important to the study of attitudes toward gun control, since these underlying dynamics have been recognized as shaping public opinion on gun control.

Research Statement

Given the history of mass shootings and recent school shootings across the nation, examining attitudes toward gun control laws within this context is essential. Past studies provide mixed findings, and many articles address how demographic characteristics, gun ownership, past victimization, and anti and pro-gun organizations affect gun control attitudes (Celinska, 2007; Dixon & Lizotte, 1987; Kleck, 1996; Patten, Thomas, & Wada, 2012; Reed, 1972). This study explores public attitudes a few days after the 2012 Sandy Hook mass school shooting when the public was still reeling from the horrific event. Many studies compare the characteristics of recent mass shootings to understand the dynamics of the shooter, or to argue that school shootings should or should not be a factor in the gun control debate (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010;

Follman, 2012). Other studies examine the influence of particular mass shootings on people's attitudes toward gun control, but do not accurately reflect people's immediate thoughts because the data is collected weeks after the event (Schildkraut, 2012). It is important to investigate gun control immediately following such shootings because this is when attitudes are heightened due to vast media coverage. This study will use data collected just days after the 2012 Sandy Hook Mass shooting in New Town, Connecticut, to examine the respondents' familiarity with the shooting and respondents' opinions about whether that shooting reflects isolated acts of troubled individuals or larger issues.

Organization of the Remainder of the Thesis

This chapter introduced the two opposing sides to gun control and provided a brief historical overview of attitudes toward gun control in the US. This chapter also provided a historical overview of school shootings before and after the early 1980s. The next chapter explores previous literature, defines concepts, and examines the theoretical orientation that guides this thesis. Chapter Three explores the methodology and provides an examination of the statistical methods used. Chapter Four provides the results of the statistical analysis, and Chapter Five discusses the results in relation to previous studies, the limitations of the study, and offers suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the Chapter

The objective of this thesis is to explore the influence of an individual's familiarity with the 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary and their opinions as to whether this school shooting reflects greater societal issues on their attitudes toward gun control. More specifically, a theoretical perspective is used that outlines the underlying structural characteristics of attitudes toward gun control. In this chapter, the conceptual approach guiding this thesis, the cultural theory of risk, is proposed. Additionally, previous literature is discussed.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural Theory of Risk

Historically, the cultural theory of risk has helped explain political conflict over various societal risks, and recently it has been used to understand attitudes deriving from various worldviews. Kahan and Braman (2003) describe the cultural theory of risk in this way: "an individual will select one or the other risk for attention, depending on how society's response to that risk coheres from a person's individual worldview" (p. 1299). The current study frames the gun control debate as competing perceptions of risk (Kahan & Braman, 2003). Gun control advocates argue that insufficient firearm regulations make the public vulnerable to mass shootings. Advocates opposing gun control argue that

excessive regulation leaves the public unable to defend themselves from mass shootings (Celinska, 2007; Kahan & Braman, 2003). Disagreements about perceptions of risk reflect disparities between people's individually held values that are part of their worldviews. There are two cultural worldviews relevant for this study: individualistic and collectivist (Kahan & Braman, 2003). An individualistic view cherishes individual autonomy and self-reliance. A collectivist view values group interests and collective responsibility for community well-being (Celinska, 2007; Kahan & Braman, 2003; Kleck, Gertz, & Bratton, 2009).

People understand gun control through their own socialization, which determines what cultural worldview they choose. An individual's cultural worldview influences how they perceive gun control, and has been correlated with structural characteristics, such as gender, race, region, religion, military experience, and subjective measures, including trust in police (Cook & Ludwig, 2003). An individualistic person is emotionally independent and self-reliant. Self-reliant individuals favor little government oversight, equal opportunity for all, and special treatment for no one (Celinska, 2007; Kahan & Braman, 2003). An individualistic person is more likely to arm themselves as a way to solve problems on their own. Owning firearms is perceived as their right, and they do not rely on police for protection (Carlson, 2012). Individualist people are more likely to live in the rural South, own guns legally, be white, favor gun ownership, and use firearms to reduce crime. They are also more apt to protect themselves before calling the proper authorities (Dixon & Lizotte, 1987; Kahan & Braman, 2003). Symbolically, this view perceives guns as a safety measure in the rare case of a mass shooting (Kahan & Braman,

2003).

In contrast, collectivist individuals place group and community interests before their own. They are more cooperative, favor government involvement, and feel collectively responsible for providing assistance to the disadvantaged. These individuals typically favor gun control legislation and rely on the government for personal protection. They believe that only law enforcement officers should possess firearms (Celinska, 2007; Kahan & Braman, 2003). Collectivists tend to be female, not own guns, live in the Northern region, and hold a democratic political view (Carlson, 2012). For these individuals, guns symbolize violence, and gun control is a way to reduce violence (Kleck, 2009).

An individual's cultural worldview contributes to the way a person symbolizes guns and their perceptions of risk, which affects attitudes toward gun control. Those holding a collectivist cultural worldview may perceive guns as symbols of violence and terror, and may be more likely to support gun control measures. Since those holding this worldview rely on government oversight and think only law enforcement should use guns, collectivists may view school shootings as a reflection of larger problems in society. They may argue that a ban on firearms across the nation would prevent school shootings. Collectivists view the risk of guns across society as a public issue that must be addressed to ensure safety by eradicating gun culture. In contrast, those holding an individualist cultural worldview may associate guns with protection and self-reliance, and may be more likely to oppose gun control measures. Since this worldview relies less on government oversight and views firearms as protective, individualists may be more likely

to view mass shootings as isolated aggressive acts that could have been prevented by more individuals carrying guns. Accordingly, individualists may believe that school officials carrying guns would deter school shooters, and that the benefits of using guns for protection and deterrence far outweighs the benefits of government regulation. The cultural theory of risk may explain how a person's cultural worldview determines their attitudes toward gun control. Collectivists may favor gun control more than individualists because collectivists believe that school shootings reflect larger issues in society, including the need for more gun control.

Empirical Background and Conceptualization

Sandy Hook Tragedy

Data for this project were obtained within days of the December 14, 2012, New Town, Connecticut mass school shooting where 22 year old Adam Lanza, a lone gunman, shot and killed 28 people: 6 employees, 20 children, his mother, and himself. Lanza's killing spree started at his residence where he first killed his mother with her .223 caliber assault rifle that he retrieved from a locked gun safe in her home. After killing his mother, Lanza drove to a nearby elementary school where he entered the school at the front office and started firing on school employees. After the front office, he walked down a hallway where classes were held and fired on teachers and students. Lanza fired 154 rounds in less than five minutes. As police officers swarmed the school, Lanza shot and killed himself with a handgun from his pocket. This single, horrific event changed many lives, and led to many political events (Cross & Pruitt, 2013). There have been many other school and mass shootings that have stunned the nation, such as the 1999

Columbine High School shooting and the 2012 movie theatre shooting in Aurora, Colorado (Cross & Pruitt, 2013; Follman, 2012). In response to these shootings, many Democratic leaders have focused on altering gun policies, and they have faced challenges from Republican leaders. Many political leaders blame America's gun culture, violent video games, and poor parenting. Regardless of political leaders' framing, it is important to understand factors shaping attitudes toward gun control.

Gun Control

The definition of gun control among researchers is limited by the scope of each particular study (Kleck, 1986), with definitions varying across studies. For example, a study examining gun ownership will have a different definition of gun control than a study exploring policies before the purchase of a firearm, because one study assesses attitudes toward current laws about access to firearms, and the other observes gun ownership and gun control attitudes (Kleck, 1986; Lambert & Silva, 1998; Sherman, 2001). The current study defines gun control as past, present, and future laws or policies aimed at limiting the possession of firearms (Kleck, 1986).

There are many factors that shape a person's attitude toward gun control. The most commonly reported factors include familiarity with firearms, past victimization, gun violence, gang activity, cultural experiences, risk factors among firearms use, state and federal gun laws, demographic characteristics, gun culture, media, suicidal behaviors, and gun ownership (Celinska, 2007; Cornell, 2006; Dowler, 2002; Kahan & Braman, 2003; Kalish & Kimmel, 2010; Meloy et al., 2001; Thompson et al., 2006).

Prior studies have shown that gun ownership is a strong predictor of attitudes

toward gun control. Historically, gun owners have been more hostile toward an increase in gun control measures than those who do not own guns (Smith, 1980; Thompson et al., 2006). However, recent studies have found that gun owners and non-gun owners are equally supportive of major firearm policies intended to increase gun control. The results are attributable to many factors, but the main contributor is that the personal characteristics of gun owners have changed. In the past, guns were primarily used for protection and hunting, but today many gun owners use firearms for recreational purposes (Stolzenberg & D'aleccio, 2000; Thompson et al., 2006). Moreover, the majority of citizens, including those who do not own guns, oppose an all-out ban of firearms, but many believe there needs to be improvement in gun control regulations (Dowler, 2002; Thompson et al., 2006).

Familiarity and Gun Control

It is not surprising that mass shootings receive so much media attention. There is considerable research about how media influences perceptions of policies, with much of the literature examining gun or crime-related policies (Schildkraut, 2012). For example, Dowler (2002) concluded that media sources influence attitudes toward gun control. Crime show viewers are likely to oppose gun control because of a “cultivation effect” of hero versus villains, with heroes prevailing. Individuals who receive their news from print media other than a newspaper are also more likely to oppose gun control. Newspaper descriptions of gun-related news are typically more balanced, and those who obtain their information from this media source are more likely to support gun control (Dowler, 2002). Other studies focus on “media framing” of social issues to make them

relatable to the intended audience (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). For example, Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2001) found that when concealed weapons permits were framed as public safety problems opposition to conceal and carry laws increased. In contrast, when concealed weapons permits were framed as an individual's right to bear arms opposition to such laws decreased. These studies highlight the media's ability to influence gun control attitudes.

The current study examines the public's familiarity with the 2012 tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary, with the assumption that familiarity stems at least partially from exposure to media. Technology has brought innovation to our finger tips, exposing individuals to news items at varied times and in varied amounts. Social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, and news notifications on smart phones, are examples of how rapidly news stories can proliferate (Schildkraut, 2012; Seate, Cohen, Fujioka & Hoffner, 2012). Gerbner and colleagues (1980) found that level of television consumption impacts fear of crime. Those who had greater television consumption of crime had more fear of crime. In contrast, those who had little television consumption of crime were less likely to fear crime. Jackson (2005) found that people who were more familiar with crime in a particular community worried about victimization and were anxious about safety, especially in certain situations, such as walking home alone at night. From these studies we know that the more familiar people are with crime, the more they fear it. A person more familiar with the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting will likely fear gun violence and will be more likely to favor gun control than a person less familiar with the Sandy Hook shooting. Hypothesis one is:

H1: Respondents who are more familiar with the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting will be more likely to favor gun control.

Isolated Acts versus Broader Problems and Gun Control

This study will also analyze the respondent's opinion regarding whether the school shooting represents broader societal problems or isolated acts of troubled individuals. Previous research linking isolated acts and broader problems in society is scarce. Broader problems in society include social environment issues connected to school shootings, such as media, weapons culture, and bullying (Twemlow et al., 2002). They point to cultural or structural factors, such as a violence-oriented culture or a gun culture in America, as the cause of mass shootings (Pew Research Center, 2012). From the cultural theory of risk, we can assume that collectivist individuals are more apt to believe that school shootings reflect broader problems in society. Since collectivists connect guns with violence, they may consider school shootings a broader issue of inadequate gun control policies in America. In contrast, individualists associate guns with protection and may think school shootings are isolated acts where the school shooter "snapped".

The current study is concerned with people's understandings of these shootings and how that contributes to attitudes toward gun control. If people think broader issues are at play, then societal policies, like gun control, might be helpful. If isolated actions are the cause, then public policies will not deter shootings. This has been studied in previous literature (Kleck, 2009; Twemlow et al., 2002). Kleck (2009) argues that school shootings are the worst possible reason for more gun control. He evaluated six school

shootings and found that five of the school shooters used guns that were stolen and just one used a gun that was obtained legally. Twemlow and colleagues (2002) argue that there are larger social environmental issues at play, such as violent media, teasing, bullying, and easy access to firearms. Gun availability due to lax gun control laws and inadequate firearm security measures at home may have failed to prevent many school shootings.

Other studies make the argument that people seek to predict and control their environments by attempting to understand causes of events (Joslyn & Haider-Markel, 2013). There are two types of attributions that guide attitudinal and behavioral responses: internal and external. Joslyn and Haider-Markel (2013) state “internal attributions suggest that the character, attitudes, personality, or dispositions of individuals give rise to their behaviors” (p. 412). People with internal attributes view school shootings as isolated acts not attributable to outside forces (Carlson, 2012; Joslyn & Haider-Markel, 2013). In contrast, “for external attributions, environmental or social context produces the given behavior” (Joslyn & Haider-Markel, 2013, p. 413). Thus, the school shooter is viewed as having acted because of larger factors in the social setting, such as a gun culture or bullying (Boylan, Kates, Lindsey, & Gugala, 2013; Joslyn & Haider-Markel, 2013). These attributions have the potential to shape attitudes toward gun control. Internal-oriented people would be more likely to oppose gun control, while external-oriented people would be more likely to favor gun control. Although the literature is scarce in this area, we can conclude that because of these attributions and the cultural theory of risk the public perceives tragedies differently, thereby shaping their attitudes towards gun control.

Hypothesis two is:

H2: Respondents believing the 2012 Newtown, Connecticut shooting reflects broader problems in American culture will be more likely to favor gun control.

Control Variables and Gun Control

In addition to familiarity and perceptions regarding the root cause of mass shootings, several background factors are controlled for. These include gender, region, age, and political ideology. These factors are included because previous literature has shown these characteristics to be significant predictors of attitudes toward gun control. For example, gender was included because Smith's (1999) analysis found that women are more likely to favor gun control because women are more likely to oppose violence and the use of force, and men are more likely to own and use guns. Regional differences are important because cultural patterns embedded within Southern society contribute to differences in gun control attitudes between the North and South. For example, people from the South are less likely to support gun control because they are socialized to use guns for activities including hunting, recreational activities, gun collecting, and sport shooting activities (Bogus, 2008; Miller, Hemenway, & Wechsler, 2002; Reed, 1972). Research has revealed that age is correlated with attitudes toward gun control. Studies show younger adults are more likely to support gun control than older adults (Smith, 2002; Smith, 1980). In fact, there is major opposition to gun control from those who are fifty or older (Smith, 2002). Therefore, age was included. Political ideology accounts for wide differences in perceptions, with conservatives more likely to oppose gun control measures, while liberals are more likely to support gun control measures. "Middle of the

road” respondents are important because mass shooting tragedies usually sway their opinion the most (Cavanaugh, Bouffard, Wells, & Nobles, 2012; Patten et al., 2012; Smith, 1980). Given these findings, this study includes these characteristics in the analysis of attitudes toward gun control.

Summary and Overview

In Chapter Two, the cultural theory of risk was linked to mass shootings and to attitudes towards gun control. In addition, previous literature regarding the media, broader societal problems, and isolated acts of aggression were discussed, and hypotheses based on past evidence were formulated. Chapter Three will explain the methodology used to test the hypotheses. The data set, the methods used to collect the data, analytic strategy, and measurement of each variable will also be explained.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This thesis examines familiarity with a specific school shooting, and opinions about if individuals believe school shootings are an isolated issue or broader problem, on attitudes toward gun control. A secondary data source is used to address the research questions and hypotheses. This chapter details the methodology of this thesis. First, the data and sample will be explained, and then measurement of the variables will be detailed. The final section of this chapter will describe the analytic strategy used to explore the hypotheses.

Data and Sample

Data for this research are from the December 2012 Gun Control Survey conducted by the Princeton Survey Research Associates International for the Pew Research Center and People and Press. The questionnaire was administered via telephone interviews using a combination of landline and cellular random digit dialing (RDD) provided by Survey Sampling International (SSI) from December 17-19, 2012. As many as five attempts were made to contact every telephone number, and calls were staggered over the time and day to maximize contact with potential respondents. For the landline sample ($N= 734$), interviewers asked, at random, to speak with the youngest male or female adult. For the cellular sample ($N= 485$), interviews were conducted with the person who answered the phone and verified that they were an adult and in a safe place

before proceeding. This resulted in a nationally represented sample of 1,219 adults residing in the United States. There were a total of 21,795 calls made to potential respondents. Combining both landline and cellular phone calls, the survey had a 16% response rate. In this analysis listwise deletion was used resulting in 1,011 cases.

Measures

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study, *gun control*, measured the respondent's attitude toward gun control by asking, "please tell me if you would favor or oppose banning the possession of handguns except by law enforcement officers". The response categories were organized into two groups: (1) "favor" and (0) "oppose". Don't know or refused answers were coded as missing data.

Independent Variable

The first independent variable, *familiarity*, measured the respondent's familiarity with the school shooting by asking "how much, if anything, have you read or heard about a shooting at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut?" The respondents were presented with three response categories: (3) "a lot", (2) "a little", and (1) "nothing at all". Don't know or refused answers were treated as missing data.

The second independent variable, *root cause*, measured the respondent's opinions about the 2012 events at Newton, Connecticut, and what they believe the root cause of the shooting was by asking "do you think this shooting reflects broader problems in American society, or are things like this just the isolated acts of troubled individuals?" The response categories were (0) "isolated acts" and (1) "broader problems". Don't know

or refused answers were coded as missing data.

Control Variables

Along with independent variables, four control variables are used: gender, political ideology, age, and region. *Age* was measured as follows: (1) 18-24, (2) 25-34, (3) 35-44, (4) 45-54, (5) 55-64, and (6) 65+. *Gender* was coded into a dummy variable, “1” were men and “0” were women. To gauge the respondent’s *political ideologies* the interviewer asked the respondent to describe their political views. Response categories include: (1) very conservative, (2) conservative, (3) moderate, (4) liberal, and (5) very liberal. Lastly, interviewers asked respondents where they resided to measure their *region*. Region was coded into a series of dummy variables, with South used as the comparison category. For each region (Northeast, Midwest, West, and South), a code of “1” was assigned if the respondent lived in the specified region and a “0” otherwise.

Analytic Strategy

This study will use descriptive statistics for the univariate analysis to look at the distribution of each individual variable. For the bivariate analysis, correlations will be used to examine the relationships between the variables. Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, logistic regression will be used for the multivariate analysis. This allows the researcher to estimate whether each variable is associated with an increase or decrease in the likelihood that respondents favor gun control. Two models will be used. The first model will use the control variables in predicting the dependent variable. The second model adds the two independent variables to see if they improve predictions of the dependent variable beyond the control variables.

Summary

This chapter gave an overview of the methodology utilized in this thesis including a description of the data set and the analytic strategy. The independent, dependent, and control variables were also detailed. Chapter Four will present the results and Chapter 5 will offer a discussion and conclusion.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The goal of this thesis is to explore the relationships between familiarity with and opinions about the root cause of the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting on attitudes toward gun control. Data from the 2012 gun control survey ($N = 1,219$) conducted by Pew Research Center were used to address the two research questions. This chapter will outline the descriptive statistics, present the results of the bivariate correlations, and discuss the results of the logistic regression.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1. In terms of background characteristics, 47% of the respondents were male and the average age of respondents was between 45 and 54 ($SD = 1.69$). About 17% of the respondents were from the Northeast, 24% were from the Midwest, 36% were from the South, and 23% were from the West. In terms of political ideology, the mean was 2.77 ($SD = .964$), indicating that the respondents were on average fairly conservative. Looking at the independent variables, familiarity had a mean of 2.89 ($SD = .34$), which indicates that respondents were quite familiar, on average, with the 2012 New Town, Connecticut shooting. Further, approximately 52% of the respondents believed that the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting reflected broader problems in society. In terms of attitudes toward gun control, only 29% of the respondents favored the banning of handguns in America

except for police officers.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics*

Variables	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Sex ^a	1,219	.47	--	0-1
Political ideology ^b	1,145	2.77	.96	1-5
Age	1,199	4.19	1.69	1-6
Northeast	1,219	.17	--	0-1
Midwest	1,219	.23	--	0-1
South	1,219	.35	--	0-1
West	1,219	.23	--	0-1
Familiarity	1,210	2.89	.34	1-3
Root cause ^c	1,127	.52	.50	0-1
Gun control ^d	1,160	.29	.45	0-1

^a Sex was measured as a dummy variable with males coded as 1 and females coded as 0. ^b Political ideology was measured with very conservative as 1 to very liberal as 5. ^c Root cause was coded with isolated acts as 0 and broader problems as 1. ^d Gun control was coded with oppose as 0 and favor as 1.

Bivariate Analyses

Bivariate correlations are presented in Table 2. The results reveal a number of control variables were correlated with the independent and dependent variables.

Familiarity was found to be moderately and positively correlated with age ($r = .130, p < .001$), indicating that older respondents were more familiar with the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting. Root cause was moderately and negatively correlated with sex ($r = -.127, p < .001$), which means that males were less likely to view society as the root cause of the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting. Root cause was weakly and positively related to political ideology ($r = .090, p < .01$), age ($r = .071, p < .05$), and Northeastern ($r = .078, p < .05$). This indicates that more liberal respondents, older respondents, and respondents living in the Northeast were more likely to believe that the root cause of the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting is broader problems. Gun control was moderately and negatively correlated with

gender ($r = -.204, p < .001$) and South ($r = -.103, p < .001$), which indicates that men and respondents living in the South were more likely to oppose gun control. Gun control was weakly to moderately and positively correlated with Northeast ($r = .095, p < .01$), but moderately and positively correlated with political ideology ($r = .235, p < .001$). This means that more liberal respondents and respondents living in the Northeast were more likely to favor gun control. The findings showed that gun control was moderately and positively correlated with root cause ($r = .129, p < .001$), which indicates that those who favor gun control were more likely to believe that broader problems were the root cause of the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting.

Table 2. *Bivariate Correlations (N= 1,011)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gun control ^a	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
2. Familiarity	-.004	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
3. Root cause ^b	.129 ^{***}	.036	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
4. Sex ^c	-.204 ^{***}	-.031	-.127 ^{***}	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
5. Political ideology ^d	.235 ^{***}	-.014	.090 ^{**}	-.071 [*]	--	--	--	--	--	--
6. Age	.030	.130 ^{***}	.071 [*]	-.084 ^{**}	-.117 ^{***}	--	--	--	--	--
7. Northeast	.095 ^{**}	.015	.078 [*]	-.005	.114 ^{***}	-.036	--	--	--	--
8. Midwest	.014	.005	-.059	-.028	.030	.029	-.252 ^{***}	--	--	--
9. South	-.103 ^{**}	.001	-.032	.025	-.116 ^{***}	.008	-.350 ^{***}	-.427 ^{***}	--	--
10. West	.020	-.021	.027	.004	.000	-.007	-.242 ^{***}	-.296 ^{***}	-.411 ^{***}	--

Note: ^{*} $p < .05$, ^{**} $p < .01$, ^{***} $p < .001$ (two-tailed test) ^a Gun control was coded with oppose as 0 and favor as 1. ^b Root cause was coded with isolated acts as 0 and broader problems as 1. ^c Sex was measured as a dummy variable with males coded as 1 and females coded as 0. ^d Political ideology was measured with very conservative as 1 to very liberal as 5.

Regression Results

Results for Model 1

Logistic Regression was used to estimate whether each variable was associated with an increase or decrease in the likelihood of favoring gun control. Results for the two

models are presented in Table 3. Model 1 explores the relationships between the control variables (sex, political ideology, age, and region) and the likelihood the respondent favors gun control. In the sample, the explained variance is almost 14%, indicating 86% of the variance is attributable to factors that have not been accounted for. The results indicate being a woman significantly increases the odds of favoring gun control ($e^b = .428, p < .001$). The respondents identifying as more liberal have significantly greater odds of favoring gun control ($e^b = 1.71, p < .001$). Living in the Northeast ($e^b = 1.894, p < .01$) and West ($e^b = 1.507, p < .05$) regions of the United States significantly increased the odds of favoring gun control compared to those from the South.

Results for Model 2

Model 2 adds the primary independent variables. In the sample, the explained variance is over 15%, indicating 85% of the variance is attributable to other factors. Similar to the first model, being a woman was found to significantly increase the odds of favoring gun control ($e^b = .424, p < .001$). Liberal respondents also had greater odds of favoring gun control ($e^b = 1.67, p < .001$). Living in the Northeast also significantly increased the odds of favoring gun control ($e^b = 1.76, p < .01$) compared to the South. Two hypotheses were tested in this model. The first hypothesis posited that respondents having more familiarity with this mass shooting would be more likely to favor gun control. This hypothesis was not supported because familiarity was not significant. This study found support for the second hypothesis about beliefs regarding the root cause of the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting and gun control attitudes. Respondents who believed that the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting represents broader societal problems had

significantly increased odds of favoring gun control ($e^b = 1.486, p < .01$).

Table 3. *Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Log Odds of Gun Control*

Variables	Model 1 (N= 1,083)			Model 2 (N= 1,011)		
	B	SE (B)	e ^B	B	SE (B)	e ^B
1. Sex ^a	-.848***	.145	.428	-.848***	.152	.424
2. Political ideology ^b	.535***	.077	1.71	.515***	.079	1.67
3. Age	.067	.043	1.07	.055	.045	1.06
4. Northeast ^c	.639**	.204	1.89	.566**	.212	1.76
5. Midwest ^c	.279	.191	1.32	.290	.198	1.33
6. Western ^c	.410*	.193	.150	.345	.200	1.41
7. Familiarity	--	--	--	-.145	.245	.865
8. Root cause ^d	--	--	--	.396***	.151	1.49
9. Constant ^e	-2.63***	.334	.072	-2.28***	.766	.102
10. -2 log likelihood	1184.205	--	--	1099.454	--	--
11. Nagelkerke R ²		.139			.151	

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; (two-tailed test) ^a Sex was measured as a dummy variable with males coded as 1 and females coded as 0. ^b Political ideology was measured with very conservative as 1 to very liberal as 5. ^c Region was coded as a series of dummy variables, with South as the comparison group. ^d Root cause was coded with isolated acts as 0 and broader problems as 1. ^e Gun control was coded with oppose as 0 and favor as 1.

Summary and Overview

This chapter detailed the descriptive statistics, the correlations, and logistic regression results. There was no evidence that familiarity with the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting impacted respondents' attitudes toward gun control. However, the results showed that respondents believing the Sandy Hook shooting was caused by broader problems in society were more likely to favor gun control. Chapter Five will provide additional discussion of the results, as well as connect the study back to previous literature and the cultural theory of risk. Additionally, the next chapter will discuss implications of the results, limitations of the thesis, and ideas for future research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The goal of this thesis is to explore the relationships between familiarity with and opinions about the root cause of the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting on attitudes toward gun control. Data from the 2012 Gun Control Survey ($N = 1,219$) conducted by Pew Research Center were used to address the two research questions. This chapter will review and discuss the findings of this thesis. The results will be related back to the theoretical orientation and previous literature that guided this thesis. Next, implications of the findings and the limitations will be discussed. Lastly, suggestions for future research will be proposed, and a brief conclusion will be provided.

Discussion of Results

Control Variables

First, the control variables will be discussed. In this study, women were more likely to favor gun control, which is not surprising because women receive less gun socialization than men (Kleck, 1996; Patten et al., 2012; Smith, 1999). Given previous research, it was anticipated that conservatives would oppose gun control. Historically, conservatives prefer little government oversight, which causes them to oppose gun control. In contrast, liberals favor government oversight and believe that only law enforcement officials should possess guns because guns pose a risk to society (Cavanaugh et al., 2012). In line with previous research, liberals were more likely to

support gun control and conservatives were more likely to oppose gun control. Previous research shows younger individuals favor gun control more than older people (Patten et. al., 2012). In contrast, in this study age was not significant. The changing nature of mass shootings may play a role. Many older people use guns for hunting and protection. As mass shootings became more horrific, attitudes may have shifted (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Patten et. al., 2012). Additionally, this study shows respondents from the Northeast and West are more likely to favor gun control than respondents from the South. This may be due to the Southern subculture that promotes socialization with guns for recreational, protection, and gun collecting (Bogus, 2008; Miller et al., 2002; Reed, 1972).

Independent Variables

According to hypothesis one respondents who are more familiar with the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting will be more likely to favor gun control. This hypothesis was not supported because familiarity with the Sandy Hook shooting had no impact on people's attitudes toward gun control. In previous literature, scholars reported that media consumption and media framing influenced people's attitudes toward social issues (Dowler, 2002; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Jackson, 2005). Familiarity with this school shooting might increase fear of guns because it shows what guns are capable of. The 2012 Sandy Hook shooting cannot be framed as anything but a tragedy because of the many young lives that were taken. As individuals learned about this school shooting, their first response was likely empathy for the victims and their families. Perhaps because respondents were likely more focused on the young lives that were lost, familiarity did not shape their gun control attitudes.

The second hypothesis was supported. Respondents who believe that this shooting represents broader problems had significantly greater odds of favoring gun control. This is consistent with previous research (Kleck, 2009; Twemlow et al., 2002), which shows that attributions guide our attitudes toward social policies by helping us understand the cause of events. Two types of attributions are relevant to this study. Those with external attributions believe that the environment produces behavior, while those with internal attributions believe that attitudes and personality give rise to behavior (Carlson, 2012; Joslyn & Haider, 2013). Those who believe that a violent weapons culture, bullying problems in schools, or other structural factors are the root cause of this school shooting are more likely to favor gun control. The findings suggest that these respondents may use external attributions because they believe that the school shooting is caused by outside social forces that compelled the shooter. In contrast, those who believe that mental illness or aggression were the root cause of this school shooting are more likely to oppose gun control. These respondents may use internal attributions to shape their attitudes.

The cultural theory of risk focuses on people's cultural worldviews. According to this theory, cultural worldviews and structural characteristics determine attitudes toward gun control (Celinska, 2007; Kahan & Braman, 2003). Two cultural worldviews are relevant for studying gun control: individualistic and collectivist. Individualists are emotionally independent, favor little government oversight, and are self-reliant. Collectivists are more cooperative, favor government involvement, and feel collectively responsible for society. Collectivists associate guns with violence, while individualists associate guns with self-reliance and protection (Celinska, 2007; Kahan & Braman,

2003). This thesis provides support for the cultural theory of risk. For example, collectivists tend to hold more liberal political views because of their reliance on the government for protection. The results show that liberals are more apt to favor gun control than conservatives, which likely stems from their collectivist cultural worldviews. Collectivists believe that school shootings are a direct result of broader problems in society, such as the media, bullying, video games, and an American gun culture. Therefore, the collectivist respondents may see the school shooting as a direct result of social forces that influenced the shooter. According to the cultural theory of risk, those believing that social forces, such as broader problems in society, are the cause of school shootings favor gun control. On the other hand, individualists believe that school shootings are individual acts of aggression and they oppose gun control.

People in the South are more likely to oppose gun control relative to those from other regions because of cultural patterns embedded in the South (Bogus, 2008; Miller et al., 2002; Reed, 1972). In this study it was surprising that not all of the regions favored gun control more than the South. Recreational gun use may be in decline in the South, reducing opposition to gun control. On the other hand, it is possible that other regions are experiencing increased recreational gun use, such as hunting, reducing people's fear of guns. Perhaps the distinct cultural patterns in the South have dissipated across time. Scholars believe that there is a honor subculture in the South that involves handling disputes privately, which leads to violence from self-defense (Hayes & Lee, 2005; Vandal, 2000). It is also thought that the South's honor culture existed because of inadequate or corrupt police departments (Cohen, 1996; Felson & Pare, 2010). Perhaps

the laws in the South are becoming less permissive of self-defense and police agencies are improving in their ability to handle disputes.

Implications

A contribution of this thesis is that familiarity did not impact people's attitudes toward gun control. This study assumed that familiarity with the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting stemmed at least partially from exposure to the media. Scholars have argued that media framing of events and familiarity with social issues, such as crime, impact attitudes. Therefore, it was argued that familiarity with the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting would increase fear of guns, thereby shaping attitudes toward gun control. However, familiarity with this school shooting did not have an impact on gun control. Regardless of exposure to media portrayals of this school shooting, people seem to regard the Sandy Hook shooting as a tragedy rather than a gun control issue.

Opinions about the root cause of school shootings contributes to people's attitudes toward gun control. According to the cultural theory of risk socialization shapes people's opinions on the root cause of school shootings. As gun socialization increases the fear of guns should decrease, which causes people to view problems with the shooter's personality as the cause of school shootings rather than poor gun control policies. This leads to arguments between gun control advocates and opponents. Gun control advocates argue that gun control restrictions are too lenient, allowing the mentally ill easy access to guns, causing more school shootings. This is problematic for those opposing gun control. Guns do pose a risk to society, but so do other weapons. Gun control opponents could argue that banning guns will only make people upset with the government.

The results of this study show that school shootings impact attitudes toward gun control. So how do we reduce school shootings across the nation? Those who believe that broader problems are the cause of school shootings suggest altering gun control policies along with reducing video game violence and bullying. Those opposing gun control recommend arming school faculty in the rare case of an intruder. Those who are neutral believe that we should do nothing. This study suggests doing more research on gun control and school shootings to better understand the public's response in order to make policy recommendations that are politically feasible.

Limitations

This section discusses the limitations of this thesis. First, the data set measures the attitudes of respondents just a few days after the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting. Some may consider this a weakness, arguing that people's attitudes about guns are intensified after a school shooting and reflect immediate thoughts of the tragedy, rather than gun control. Others consider this a strength (Schildkraut, 2012), because surveying people immediately following a school shooting means gun control is at the forefront of their minds. This may provide researchers with accurate data about how school shootings influence attitudes toward gun control. Second, the measurement of the dependent variable contained limited variation. The use of a one item, self-reported measure may not fully capture people's attitudes, whereas a multiple-item would more accurately measure attitudes toward gun control. Third, in the questionnaire respondents were not able to expand on their answers when asked whether they believed school shootings reflected broader problems in society or isolated acts of troubled individuals. The

questionnaire gave broad definitions of broader problems and isolated acts and respondents may have misinterpreted the meaning of the terms. Lastly, the few studies that examine how school shootings impact attitudes toward gun control use data from multiple school shootings to reinforce their results. This study was not able to do so, making it less generalizable.

Directions for Future Research

This thesis examined the relationships between school shootings and attitudes toward gun control using several control variables, but the data set used had few demographic characteristics to choose from. Race (Carlson, 2012; Felson & Pare, 2010; Smith, 1980) and gun ownership (Celinska, 2007; Kleck, 1996; Smith, 1980; Thompson et. al., 2006) have been shown to impact attitudes toward gun control. Whites compared to other races are more likely to use guns for recreational purposes and protection, thus they are more apt to oppose gun control (Carlson, 2012; Felson & Pare, 2010; Smith, 1980). Gun ownership is a key predictor of attitudes toward gun control regardless of the reason for owning the gun (e.g. recreational use, protection, etc.) (Celinska, 2007; Kleck, 1996; Smith, 1980). For this reason, future research should explore how race and gun ownership impact people's beliefs about the root cause of school shootings and attitudes toward gun control. Additionally, this study made the argument that using a data set from just days after the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting is an advantage because the data captures people's attitudes while the subject is at the forefront of their minds. To test whether this is the case, it would be useful to analyze data gathered before and after a school shooting. This type of data would allow the researcher to analyze attitudes toward gun control

before and after a shooting. It would also be helpful to study the relationship between school shootings and attitudes toward gun control qualitatively. With interviews, respondents could provide in-depth reasons for their attitudes toward gun control, which would clarify beliefs about the root cause of school shootings.

Conclusion

This thesis examined the impacts of familiarity and beliefs about the root cause of the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting on gun control. Since gun control is an immediate issue in the US, especially with the tragic school shootings that have stunned the nation, it is important to study these relationships. This thesis reinforces the existing research on gun control and school shootings, finding that the root cause of school shootings impacts people's attitudes toward gun control. This is a contribution because it shows that people who believe that school shootings are isolated acts of aggressive individuals view gun control differently than those who believe that school shootings result from broader problems. How we view school shootings shapes our attitudes toward gun control. This thesis also contributes to existing literature because the results do not support the hypothesis that familiarity with the Sandy Hook shooting influences people's attitudes toward gun control. This is a contribution because media familiarity in other areas of research, such as crime and politics, has been shown to impact people's attitudes. Overall, the results show the importance of beliefs about the root cause of school shootings on attitudes toward gun control.

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