



College of Professional Studies

The PhD Program

Pennsylvania Parents' Perspectives: Barriers Preventing New Legislative Gun Reform to
Mitigate School Shootings

By

Francis Joseph Dombrowski III

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

PhD in Strategic Leadership and Administrative Studies



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Abstract

Gun violence and school shootings have become a persistent issue in the United States, sparking continuous debates on legislative gun reform. Despite numerous incidents of mass shootings in schools, legislative measures to address the crisis remain stagnant. This qualitative study examines the barriers preventing new legislative gun reform in Pennsylvania from the perspective of parents with children enrolled in K-12 schools and higher education institutions. Grounded in Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, this study explores the psychological and sociopolitical factors influencing parents' perspectives on gun control policies.

Using a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Pennsylvania parents to capture their lived experiences, concerns, and perceptions regarding firearm legislation and school safety. The study identifies key themes, including political polarization, media influence, personal experiences with firearms, and concerns about government overreach. Additionally, findings suggest that cognitive dissonance plays a crucial role in shaping opinions, as individuals reconcile personal beliefs with societal realities.

The results of this research contribute to the broader discourse on firearm policy by offering qualitative insights into the viewpoints of parents—an influential demographic in policy advocacy. By understanding the cognitive and emotional factors underlying resistance to or support for gun reform, policymakers and educators can develop more effective strategies to bridge ideological divides and implement measures aimed at reducing gun violence in schools.

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Chapter 1

The Problem and its Setting

Introduction

On April 20, 1999, twelve students and one teacher were murdered by two students at Columbine High School in Colorado. This infamous incident went down as the deadliest mass school shooting in U.S. history until the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, CT in 2012 when 27 students and teachers lost their lives. Ten years later in 2022, 22 students and teachers lost their lives in the Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, TX.

On Monday, January 21, 2023, twelve victims were murdered and nine were injured during a shooting in Monterey Park, California. Two days later, a different gunman murdered seven victims and injured one individual at Half Moon Bay, California. On January 16, an execution of six family members occurred inside their home in Goshen, California. The month of January 2023 also saw three additional mass shootings in Ohio, Utah, and North Carolina where 17 people combined were murdered. In all, 42 human beings lost their lives, half of the number that had happened year to date (Gun Violence Archive, 2023). This was just a fraction of the gun violence totals in the United States in 2023, and these unfortunate acts of violence continued to persist and plague our society.

According to Gun Violence Archive's datasets, there had been 49 reported mass shootings that had already occurred in 2023. Of these mass shootings, there had been 198 reported injuries and 84 fatalities across 28 states. Further exploration of the data showed there had been six mass murders by firearms with 42 total fatalities and 11 injuries across four states.

During 2022, there were 648 reported mass shootings totaling 674 deceased and 2,703 injured individuals across 38 states (Gun Violence Archive, 2023).

In the United States, there was no universal definition of “mass shooting,” which made it difficult for different agencies and organizations to accurately compare and report findings between these groups. The nonprofit research group, The Gun Violence Archive, considered a mass shooting as an incident where four or more people were shot or killed, excluding the subject (Gun Violence Archive, 2023). USA TODAY considered a mass shooting when four or more individuals became injured, excluding the subject, due to gunfire regardless of whether there were fatalities or not (Grantham-Philips, 2023). The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) did not have a definition for a mass shooting but did have one for mass murder (killing) - a single event where there were four or more fatalities excluding the subject (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2010).

Mass shooting fatalities themselves were a small percentage of the overall gun deaths in the United States. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), 19,834 persons died by all firearms in 2020 at a rate of 5.9% per 100,000 population (CDC, n.d.) while Gun Violence Archive (GVA) reported 19,566 deaths by firearms where 610 deaths occurred during a mass shooting, equating to approximately 3.12% of all firearm deaths (Gun Violence Archive, 2023). In the same period, 114 incidents occurred on K-12 school property where 332 people were reported to have been wounded or killed (K-12 School Shooting Database, 2023).

Public perception believed that the AR-15 semi-automatic rifle platform was used most often during the commission of mass killings and shootings compared to other firearms. Statistically, convicted inmates only possessed a rifle or shotgun 2% of the time while

committing criminal acts according to a 2016 survey of incarcerated inmates (Shapiro, 2021). There were an estimated 20 million “assault rifles” in the United States, which was only a fraction of the estimated 400 million firearms in the United States (Shapiro, 2021). Even though most murders were not committed with an “AR” style rifle, there had been successful and unsuccessful attempts to ban the platform on the federal and state levels.

Advances in technology had allowed society to digest information and news as it unfolded instantaneously. There was a constant connection to a 24-hour news cycle via cable/satellite news, social media, etc. However, with this also came disinformation, misinformation, political viewpoints, and bias that the consumer needed to disseminate to find factual and relevant information. Mass murder, killings, and violence further complicated this due to the graphic and gruesome nature of the topic that many people might never have experienced firsthand in their lifetime.

For some to cope with this topic and associated information, they might have experienced cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) was the phenomenon where humans had a natural drive for consistency and that their belief system had to become consistent with their actions or vice versa (Lawyer, 2022). When a person’s world became unstable or fell out of harmony within their own beliefs and actions, it caused tension and distress (Lawyer, 2022). These actions and beliefs were often developed and learned through the physical and psychosocial environment and from the tasks and behaviors by observing others and determining which ones to imitate (Stein, 2006). Behaviors that ended with a punishment were not likely to be repeated while positive behaviors were more likely to be reinforced (McLeod, 2023).

The “gun” debate was strictly divided between the two majority political parties in the United States, the Democrats and Republicans. Democrats generally proposed strict legislation on gun control and a full ban on “assault weapons” firearms. Most of the states that cast their electoral votes for a Democratic presidential candidate already had restrictions in place. Republicans believed that there were already enough restrictions in place and supported the 2nd Amendment. The U.S. Supreme Court majority had agreed in key cases that the government could not infringe on citizens’ rights. In 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court determined that when the Second Amendment's plain text covered an individual's conduct, the Constitution presumptively protected that conduct (*New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen*, 2022). The court also determined that the Second Amendment extended to all instruments that constituted bearable arms, even those that were not in existence at the time of the founding, and that this Second Amendment right was fully applicable to the states (*Caetano v. Massachusetts*, 2016). To justify firearm regulation, the government had to demonstrate that the regulation was consistent with the nation's historical tradition of firearm regulation. With both parties’ heels dug in, there had been very little bipartisan gun reform signed into law on the federal level.

Gun violence continued to plague society and had become a pandemic in communities around the country. There was never empathy during political debates attempting to understand the opposition’s viewpoints. These viewpoints developed from behavioral learning experiences associated with friends, family, and the localities they lived in. These interactions helped an individual to develop an understanding of what was right and wrong, as well as personal values—a culmination of these experiences. Mass shooting/killing events became disruptions that created cognitive dissonance for people because the world they knew was no longer safe. In

the same disruptive event, it created angst for those who became afraid that their possessions would now become the focus of new legislation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks used for this study were the Cognitive Theory (Piaget, 1936), Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), and Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943).

Cognitive Theory

Cognitive Theory (Piaget, 1936) examined how children and youth became able to think logically through cognition, the thinking memory processes. He believed that learning occurred through assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation occurred when individuals adjusted new experiences to fit prior concepts, whereas accommodation involved adjusting concepts to fit new experiences (Piaget, 1952).

Piaget identified four stages of cognitive development: sensory-motor, pre-operational, concrete, and formal operations. During infancy, children learned through their five senses, developed object permanence, and engaged in goal-oriented actions. The preoperational stage, which generally spanned ages two to seven, was when children began developing language and solving one-step logic problems. The concrete phase occurred between ages seven and twelve. After completing this phase, they entered the final stage of formal operations, where they were able to think logically and experienced a reduction in egocentrism (Blake & Pope, 2008).

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

To reduce cognitive dissonance, Festinger believed there were three major ways in which an individual could do so. The reduction methods included changing one of the dissonant

cognitions, adding consonant cognitions to decrease overall inconsistency, and decreasing the importance of the cognitions in the dissonant situation (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020). In other words, the individual could change their attitude on the subject, seek information to explain the inconsistent behavior, or trivialize the dissonant behavior or the importance of the attitude.

Generative cognition was an individual’s perceptions most resistant to change and carried greater weight when calculating resolutions for dissonance. The individual compared their less important cognitions to the generative cognition as part of a relationship (Beauvois & Joule, 1996).

Gaya (2017) created a diagram based on Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory that suggested people had an inner drive to hold all their attitudes and behaviors in harmony and avoid disharmony (Figure 1).

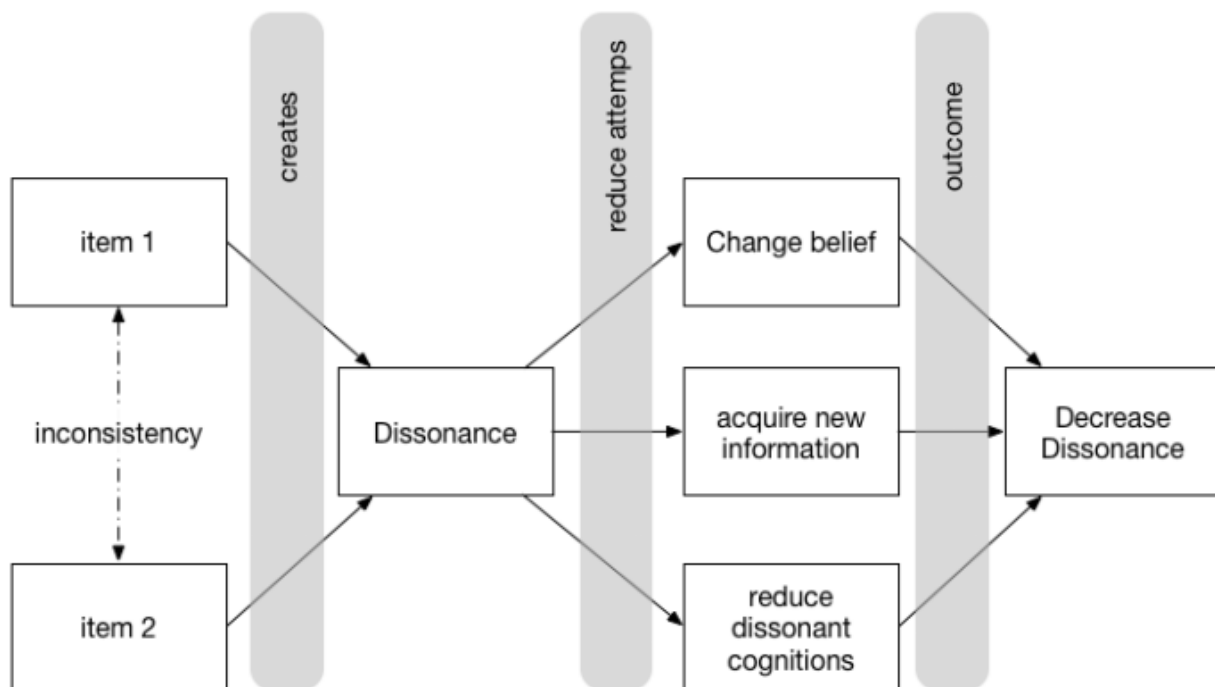


Figure 1: Visual representation of Cognitive Dissonance Theory by Festinger (Gaya, 2017).

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Motivation drove human beings to achieve goals that fulfilled their wants and needs. Needs were prioritized in order of importance, with the most important being fulfilled first, followed by the less important being satisfied (Maslow, 1943). According to Maslow, human needs were characterized into five different categories: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Figure 2). Once basic physiological needs, such as food, water, and sleep, were satisfied, the next level became the goal. A person could not attain higher levels of the pyramid if the lower levels were not satisfied (Kurt, 2020).

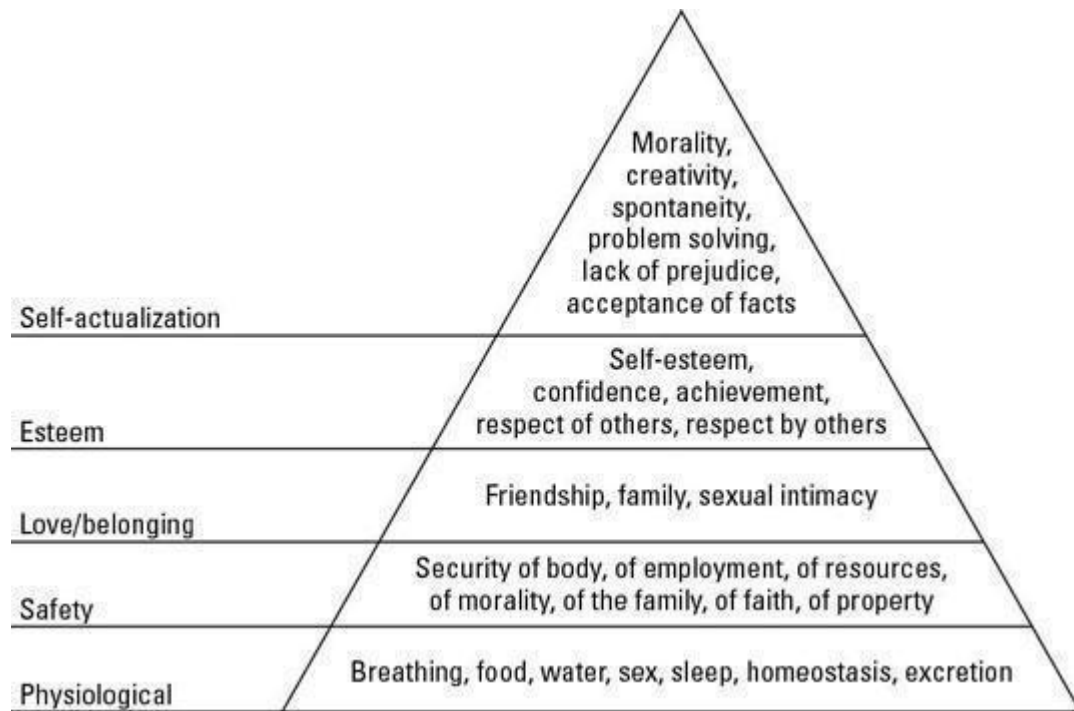


Figure 2: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Kelleher, 2016).

Conceptual Framework

The researcher constructed a conceptual framework that examined the factors of cognitive dissonance resolution in reference to school shootings in the K-12 and higher education settings. This research examined parents’ lifetime of cognitive learning and needs

from Maslow’s hierarchy when it was a factor in the origination of cognitive dissonance. The framework was adapted from Festinger’s Cognitive Dissonance Theory and incorporated Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs as an element of the dissonance, as well as a fourth option to decrease it—changing the other person’s behavior (Figure 3).

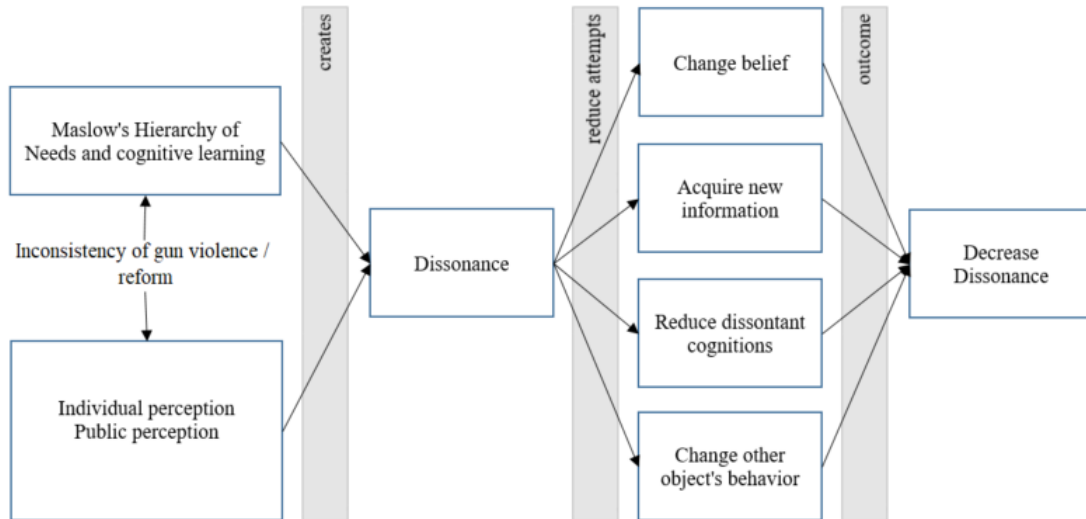


Figure 3: Researcher’s Proposed Conceptual Framework based on the visual representation of Cognitive Dissonance Theory by Festinger (Gaya, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the barriers that prevented new legislative gun reform in Pennsylvania from the perspective of parents on school shootings. Interviews were conducted with parents residing in Pennsylvania who had at least one child attending a K-12 public or private school or a child attending a public or private college or university. The researcher asked selected parents various questions about their background, upbringing, and political views that influenced their current perspective on possible legislation and what prohibited it from being adopted and passed into law.

The other purpose of this study was to contribute qualitative insight into the participants' thoughts, as most of the research on this topic had been strictly quantitative, providing only statistical analysis of results. The National Research Collaborative on Firearm Violence highlighted the need for qualitative firearms research to identify factors that influenced individual and group firearm behavior, which was often lost in purely quantitative research (Lanterman & Bliethe, 2018). By gathering various qualitative responses, stakeholders could gain a better understanding of policy administration and success.

Central Question

The central research question that guided this study was, “From the perspective of parents, what were the barriers preventing new legislative gun reform in Pennsylvania to mitigate school shootings?”

The questions that participants were asked included the following themes:

- Exploring the participants' beliefs on gun control
- Exploring the participants' perception of their social circle regarding gun violence
- Understanding the participants' main source(s) of information regarding gun violence
- Understanding the parents' level of confidence regarding their children's safety in a physical educational setting

A subset of questions the participants were asked included the following:

- How did parents believe schools advocated for gun reform to mitigate school shootings?
- How did parents believe that gun legislation would mitigate school shootings?
- How did the media play a role in school violence?

- What were parents' thoughts on how school violence was portrayed in the media?

Definition of Terms

AR-15 – “AR” came from the name of the gun’s original manufacturer, ArmaLite, Inc. The letters stood for ArmaLite Rifle, and the 15 represented the model number (Myre, 2018). For the purposes of the study, the AR-15 was defined as an assault rifle manufactured by any firearms company.

Assault Rifle – The industry’s traditional standard definition was a weapon generally used by the military, with the capability to switch between semi-automatic or fully automatic fire (Daniels, 2018). For the purposes of the study, an assault rifle was defined as a military-grade rifle, or one similar in style made for civilians, with the capability to switch between semi-automatic or fully automatic fire.

Automatic Firearm (Machinegun) – Any weapon that shoots, is designed to shoot, or can be readily restored to shoot automatically more than one shot without manual reloading by a single function of the trigger (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, 2018). For the study, this definition was used.

CDC – The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is the national public health agency. The federal agency operates under the Department of Health and Human Services and is a science-based, data-driven service organization that protects the public’s health (Centers for Disease Control, 2023). For the study, this definition was used.

Disinformation – False information that was deliberately intended to mislead by intentionally making or misstating facts (American Psychological Association, 2023). For the study, this definition was used.

FBI – The Federal Bureau of Investigation is an agency with the authority and responsibility to investigate criminal activities, provide support to other law enforcement agencies, and gather, share, and analyze intelligence to support investigations and understand and combat security threats in the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016). For the study, this definition was used.

Firearm – Any weapon that will, is designed to, or may readily be converted to expel a projectile by the action of an explosive (ATF, 2023). For the purposes of the study, a firearm was defined as any weapon classified as a pistol, rifle, or shotgun.

GVA – The Gun Violence Archive is a not-for-profit organization that provides free online public access to accurate information about gun-related violence in the United States (Gun Violence Archive, 2023). For the study, this definition was used.

K-12 Education – Relating to education from kindergarten through 12th grade (OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com, 2023). For the purposes of the study, K-12 education was defined as any grade level in public or private schools between kindergarten (K) and 12th grade.

Mass Murder (Killing) – A multiple homicide incident in which four or more victims were murdered within one event in one or more locations close in geographical area. The Investigative Assistance for Violent Crime Act of 2012; Public Law 112-265 STAT.2435 defined it as three or more killings in a single incident that occurred in a public place (National Mass Violence

Victimization Resource Center, n.d.). For the purposes of the study, mass murder was defined as the killing of four or more victims within one event in one or more locations close in geographical area.

Mass Shooting – The Gun Violence Archive considered a mass shooting to be an incident in which four or more people were shot or killed, excluding the subject (Gun Violence Archive, 2023). USA Today considered a mass shooting to be when four or more individuals were injured, excluding the subject, due to gunfire, regardless of whether there were fatalities (Grantham-Philips, 2023). For the purposes of the study, mass shootings were defined as incidents in which four or more people were shot or killed, excluding the subject.

Media – A medium of cultivation, conveyance, or expression (Merriam-Webster.com, 2024). For the purposes of the study, media was defined as mediums that included television, social media, and video games.

Misinformation – Unintentionally providing false or inaccurate information; getting the facts wrong (American Psychological Association, 2023). For the study, this definition was used.

Perpetrator – To produce, perform, or execute something likened to a crime (Merriam-Webster.com, 2023). For the purposes of the study, perpetrator was defined as the person or persons assumed or believed to have committed a violent act or crime with the use of a firearm.

School Shooting – Incidents that occurred on school property or off-campus at school-sponsored events where students attended grade levels of K-12. School incidents included shootings related to accidents, domestic violence, fights, gang activity, and suicides (K-12 School Shooting Database, 2023). For the purposes of the study, school shootings were defined as intentional acts

caused by a perpetrator to harm students, teachers, and/or faculty with the use of a firearm at a school or school function.

Semi-automatic Firearm – Any repeating firearm that utilized a portion of the energy from a fired cartridge to extract the fired cartridge case and chamber the next round, requiring a separate pull of the trigger to fire each cartridge (ATF, 2023). For the study, this definition was used.

Subject – A person who engaged in activity that a federal prosecutor identified as being within the scope of a federal grand jury investigation (Merriam-Webster.com, 2023). For the purposes of the study, the perpetrator was defined as the person or persons assumed or believed to have committed a violent act or crime with the use of a firearm.

Suspect – A person suspected of a crime (Merriam-Webster.com, 2023). For the purposes of the study, perpetrator was defined as the person or persons assumed or believed to have committed a violent act or crime with the use of a firearm.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to parents who resided in the state of Pennsylvania and currently had at least one child attending a K-12 public or private school or a child attending a public or private college or university.

Assumptions

During the study, all participants participated in individual interviews at their own discretion, without any coercion. There was a presumption that participants answered questions truthfully, accurately, and with appropriate self-awareness.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this qualitative study was to highlight the thoughts and perspectives on legislative gun reform of parents who resided in Pennsylvania and had at least one child attending a K-12 public or private school or a child attending a public or private college or university. With more than 338,000 students in the U.S. who experienced gun violence since 1999, there continued to be a perceived divide on the adoption and passing of state and federal legislation to prevent gun violence and limit school shootings (Sandy Hook Promise, 2023). A 2021 Pew Research poll found that 51% of Americans favored stricter gun laws, with 31% of Republicans and 81% of Democrats agreeing (Schaeffer, 2021). Almost two years later, an Associated Press poll found that 71% of Americans now favored gun reform, with about half of Republicans and many Democrats (Burnett, 2022). The results from this study signified the importance of finding common ground between opponents and proponents of gun legislation reform by understanding the thoughts and themes from interviewing Pennsylvania parents with children in a primary or secondary school setting.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Why Firearms are Ingrained in American Culture

There has been a great divide when it comes to the ownership of firearms in the country and how gun violence can be reduced. Two primary groups exist: those who want to ban or greatly restrict firearm access and those who oppose any restrictions on ownership.

Gun policy has remained one of the most polarizing issues in American politics. Republicans and Democrats are sharply divided over the impact of gun ownership on public safety: 79% of Republicans and independents who lean toward the Republican Party believed that gun ownership increased safety, while a nearly identical share of Democrats and Democratic leaners (78%) believed it decreased safety. Republicans and Democrats also differed on whether gun violence was a major problem for the country. About twice as many Democrats as Republicans viewed it as “a very big” national problem—81% vs. 38%, respectively (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Many gun owners took great pride in their ownership. It was not uncommon to see stickers on vehicles, posts on social media, and other forms of expression to let others know their opinion on ownership, the type of firearm they owned, or the brands they bought. A social norm existed around gun ownership and the pride associated with it, deeply tied to the United States and its flag.

The country was created and grew from gun ownership. From the Revolutionary War and winning freedom from Great Britain, to the westward expansion of the country’s wilderness, to a

bloody civil war, defeating the Axis powers in two world wars, maintaining law and order, living off the land, and basic survival, firearms were always a necessity to survive and protect.

The argument used by advocates of firearm ownership was that these were rights granted to them through federal and state law. The first evidence of this argument could be found in the Pennsylvania State Constitution of 1776, which granted citizens the right to bear arms. These rights and existing laws were canonized in the Pennsylvania Code.

The argument also drew strength from the Bill of Rights and the Constitution, written and ratified during the founding of the country and its subsequent years of infancy. Those amendments, along with future firearm regulations, were canonized in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) and the United States Code (USC).

Policy and Regulation

The federal definition of a firearm was a weapon (including a starter gun) that would expel a projectile by means of an explosive or was designed or could readily be converted to do so. This included the frame or receiver of any such weapon, any firearm muffler or silencer, or any destructive device. A “destructive device” included any explosive, incendiary, or poison gas, such as (i) bombs, (ii) grenades, or (iii) similar devices, or any combination of parts designed or intended to be converted into a destructive device, or from which a destructive device could be readily assembled. It did not include black powder or antique firearms (18 USC § 921(3)).

The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 had been the state’s first constitution following its own declaration of independence, establishing itself as a commonwealth and free from England. Much like the federal constitution, the Pennsylvania Constitution required all acts of the General

Assembly, the governor, and each governmental agency to be subordinate to it. The right of citizens to bear arms in defense of themselves and the State could not be questioned

(Pennsylvania Constitution, Article I, Section 21).

The Constitution reaffirmed the right of citizens to possess firearms with the ratification of the Second Amendment on December 15, 1791. “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” (U.S. Const. amend. II).

During the court case of *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008), the Supreme Court affirmed that the Second Amendment guaranteed the individual right to keep and bear arms for lawful uses. The court stated that the Second Amendment elevated above all other interests the right of law-abiding, responsible citizens to use arms in defense of hearth and home (Blocher & Siegel, 2021). Justice Scalia's view was that the text and history of the amendment's operative clause (i.e., “the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed”) were controlling. “The people” referred to all members of the political community, not an unspecified subset such as the militia; the phrase to “keep and bear arms” meant to have weapons and carry them, not just in a military context; and “the right of the people” referred to a preexisting right. Scalia reasoned that these textual elements showed that the amendment “guaranteed the individual right to possess and carry weapons in case of confrontation,” and that the amendment's text implicitly recognized the preexistence of the right and declared only that it “shall not be infringed” (Rose, 2008).

Two years later, the Supreme Court affirmed that individuals could exercise their Second Amendment rights regardless of city or state under the Fourteenth Amendment concerning

“equal protection under the laws” during *McDonald v. Chicago* (2010). Pennsylvania State Statute § 6120 created a limitation on the regulation of firearms and ammunition, specifying that no county, municipality, or township within the commonwealth could regulate the lawful ownership, possession, or transfer of ammunition or firearms when not for purposes of illegal activities defined by law. Statute 18 Pa.C.S. Ch. 61 also prohibited any government or law enforcement agency, or any agent thereof, from creating, maintaining, or operating any registry of firearm ownership within the Commonwealth (18 Pa.C.S. § 6111.4).

Many commentators had asserted that it was not feasible to keep guns out of the hands of violent offenders in the United States, given its permissive laws and abundance of firearms. In the United States, every adult was constitutionally entitled to own guns except those disqualified for relatively few reasons. With an estimated 270 million guns in the private hands of the public, effective control was said to be beyond reach (Cook & Pollack, 2017).

The few reasons a disqualified person was unable to own or possess a firearm under federal law were if a prohibited person was found to possess or receive a firearm or ammunition and was convicted, they would receive a minimum sentence of 15 years without parole if the offender had three or more prior convictions for a felony crime of violence (e.g., burglary, robbery, assault, possession of offensive weapons) and/or drug trafficking felony. The total list included felons, those with pending felony charges, drug users and addicts, undocumented immigrants, those issued a domestic restraining order, those with a prior domestic violence conviction, or those dishonorably discharged from the military (18 USC § 922(g) & (n)). Statute 18 USC § 922(d) also applied punishment to any person who knowingly sold, gave, or otherwise disposed of any firearm or ammunition to a prohibited person, with imprisonment of up to ten years.

Although federal law made it illegal for felons and those convicted of domestic violence to possess firearms, possession was not illegal for many of those convicted of other violent crimes under federal and state laws. A study of adult homicide offenders in Illinois found that most had a criminal history, but only 43% had a felony that would disqualify them from owning or possessing a firearm (Vittes et al., 2013).

Another group disqualified from ownership was juveniles. Under federal law, it was unlawful to sell any rifle or ammunition to anyone under the age of 18, or a handgun and handgun ammunition to a person under the age of 21. It was also a punishable crime if the transferor had reason to believe the juvenile would commit a crime of violence with the firearm or ammunition (18 USC § 922(x)(1)). Pennsylvania law did not allow anyone under the age of 18 to possess or transport a firearm but allowed exceptions for those supervised by a parent or legal guardian and with express written consent from the custodial parent or legal guardian to engage in safety training, target shooting, hunting, and other legal activities. The provision also made it illegal for an adult to deliver a firearm knowingly or intentionally to a minor (18 Pa. Cons. Stat. § 6110.1110.1).

To prevent disqualified persons from owning a firearm, Pennsylvania State law § 6111.1 charged the state police with the responsibility to administer the provisions of chapter 18 Pa.C.S. Ch. 61 relating to firearms and other dangerous articles. The state police were required to review an applicant's criminal history and fingerprint records to determine if the potential purchaser or transferee was prohibited from receipt or possession of a firearm under federal and state law. They were also required to review juvenile delinquency, criminal history, and mental health records.

The United States passed similar laws under President Clinton. The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act of 1993 mandated that all federal firearms licensees (FFLs) conduct background checks on prospective firearm transferees (FBI.gov, 2015). In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, also known as the Assault Weapons Ban (AWB). The bill focused on reducing violent crime by banning semi-automatic weapons based on their characteristics or by make and model (Friedman, 2021). This made it illegal to manufacture, transfer, or possess an assault weapon that was a semi-automatic rifle or pistol capable of accepting a detachable magazine and had two of the following features: folding or telescoping stock, pistol grip, bayonet mount, flash suppressor, or threaded barrel and/or grenade launcher, along with a list of banned firearms, duplicates, or variants. It also banned magazines with the capacity for 10 rounds of ammunition (Friedman, 2021).

The law had been written for 10 years and was never renewed, allowing it to sunset in 2004. During the decade the law was active, it regulated firearms in the following way: A sunset provision within the legislation automatically expired the bill, and Congress was unable to extend it in 2004 due to political views (Elving, 2023).

Research from 1981 to the ban in 1994 showed that the proportion of deaths in mass shootings in which an assault rifle was used was lower than it was after the ban. During the same period, mass shooting deaths were steadily rising. From 1994 to 2004, when the ban was active, the rates of shootings and deaths lowered. After the expiration of the assault ban in 2004, there was a steep rise in mass shooting deaths. Between 2004 and 2017, the average yearly shootings were 25, compared with 5.3 during the 10-year ban and 7.2 per year preceding it (Klein, 2022).

Other studies found that assault weapons were only a small fraction of firearms used during crimes, with results ranging from 2% to 8%, many of them being pistols rather than rifles prior to the ban (Koper, 2004). Assault rifles accounted for 430 of the 501 (85.8%) fatalities during the ban period from 1994 to 2004 (DiMaggio et al., 2018). Although there was a dip in firearm deaths after the ban, gun deaths remained consistent with the late 70s to the mid-80s. This statistic compared all gun deaths during the ban (Ellis, 2012). There is also an argument that the ban had nothing to do with the reduction in homicide but was due to the “Three Strikes and You’re Out” bill, which was signed into law by President Clinton in 1994 to reduce violent crime. This statute imposed life imprisonment in federal cases for persons convicted of three or more violent felonies or serious drug offenses (Whitley, 1994).

One study reviewed data from 1981 to 2017 and found that assault rifles accounted for 430 or 85.8% of the 501 mass shooting fatalities reported in 44 incidents. The study also concluded that the federal ban period was statistically associated with 9 fewer mass shooting deaths per 10,000 firearm homicides. Mass shooting fatalities were 70% less likely to occur during the federal ban period (DiMaggio et al., 2019).

President Joseph Biden signed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act on June 25th, 2022, the most significant new federal legislation to address gun violence since the Assault Weapons Ban of 1994 that expired in 2004. The bill closed the “boyfriend loophole” by updating 18 USC § 922(g) & (n) to include individuals who had or had had a continuing serious relationship of a romantic or intimate nature but who may not have lived together, been married, or shared children (Judd, 2022).

The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act also expanded background checks for prospective buyers under the age of 21. Authorities had up to 10 business days to review juvenile and mental health records. The act provided millions of dollars to states to fund prevention programs related to addiction and mental health to help carry out “red flag” laws, where authorities could temporarily confiscate firearms from anyone deemed dangerous to possess them by a judge (Cochrane & Kanno-Youngs, 2022).

President Biden issued an executive order on March 14, 2023, to have the Attorney General update the statutory definition of who is “engaged in the business” of selling firearms. This allowed more background checks to be conducted by reducing private-sale loopholes while also creating a plan to prevent former federally licensed dealers from dealing firearms if their licenses had been revoked or surrendered. The executive order aimed to improve public awareness and increase appropriate use of extreme risk protection orders, also known as red flag laws, and safe storage of firearms (The White House, 2023).

Primary market prices rose fifty percent between 1993 and 1994 while the ban was being debated in Congress, due to firearm proponents' fear that they would not be able to buy a preferred weapon (Travis, 1999).

The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) polled 1,200 Americans between 1996 and 1998 regarding their views on three types of gun control policies: general gun control, gun safety, and restriction of criminals' access to firearms. According to NORC, the data indicated that gun control advocates were at least as strong in their support for gun control as opponents were in their opposition (Smith, 2002). The National Opinion Research Center survey in 2022 showed no shift in the divide, but 52% believed it was important to prevent mass shootings while

also being able to have firearms for their personal safety. Seventy-five percent believed gun violence was a serious issue, with 80% believing it was on the rise. The study also showed broad public support for a variety of gun control policies, with 71% of Americans saying gun laws should be stricter. Majorities favored policies to restrict who could purchase guns and what kinds of guns could be purchased, with 85% supporting a federal law preventing mentally ill people from purchasing guns, compared to 59% supporting a nationwide ban on semi-automatic weapons (APNORC.org, 2023).

School Shootings

58% of perpetrators had a connection to the school, 70% were white males, 73-80% obtained guns from home, relatives, or friends, and 100% exhibited warning signs of showed behavior that was a cause for concern. In 77% of school shootings, at least one person was aware of the shooter's plan before the events occurred (Katsiyannis et al., 2023).

There have been reports since 1999 describing various individuals, schools, community, and other factors associated with school-based attacks where each of these reports' typical draws from a small pool of data creating a substantial overlap of commonalities that are unsystematic. Criteria for identifying cases, sources of information, methods and finding vary considerably (Borum et al., 2010). Profiling and warning signs meant to prevent school shootings are also not supported by existing research because these events are so rare. Most students who fit the profile will not engage in targeted school shootings and some students who are planning and preparing for an attack will be missed because they do not fit the expected profile (Barnum, Cornell, et al, 2010).

President Barack Obama utilized an executive order in 2013 to lift a ban put in place by legislation in the 1990s that was pushed by gun rights advocates in the United States Congress. The previous ban had effectively ended research by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention and other agencies to research firearm related injuries and deaths (McCarthy, 2015).

The FBI reported that there were 160 active shooter incidents between 2000 and 2014. Although most of them occurred in public places, over a quarter of them occurred at a school or college/university campus. Of the 160 shooters, all but six involved a male gunman (McCarthy, 2014).

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School Shooting Prevention

The USA has had 57 times as many school shootings as all other major industrialized nations combined (Katsiyannis et al., 2023). Three-quarters of school shootings in 2018 and 2019 had led to no fatalities, and the majority that did had two deaths or less. A large body of research characterized the neurological and physiological mechanisms by which trauma from violence impacted youth and how trauma affected both biological and psychological systems (Rossin-Slatter, 2022).

Studies had found that school shootings led to drops in student enrollment and a decline in average test scores. Students exposed to school shootings had experienced a 12.1 percent increase in absent school days, a 27.8 percent increase in being chronically absent, and more than doubled the likelihood of needing to repeat a grade (Rossin-Slatter, 2022).

A study of eight shootings at Texas public high schools had reviewed the outcomes of students in grades 10 to 11 exposed to school shootings and followed their outcomes to the age of 26. Of the group, 3.7 percent were less likely to graduate high school; 9.5 percent less likely to enroll in any college; 17.2 percent less likely to enroll in a four-year college; and 15.3 percent less likely to obtain a bachelor's degree by age 26 (Rossin-Slatter, 2022).

Exposed children were more likely to face adverse challenges, abuse drugs and alcohol,

suffer from depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), experience school failure, and become involved in criminal activity (Katsiyannis et al., 2023).

The federal Crime Control Act of 1990, the Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1990, made it illegal for any individual to knowingly possess or discharge a firearm within 1,000 feet from school grounds or on any school ground of a public, parochial, or private school 18 USC § 924(q)(2)(A).

The Gun-Free School Act (GFSA) had been passed in 1994 as part of the Improving America's School Act, which called for states to enact laws requiring that a student who brought a firearm to school or possessed a firearm on school grounds be expelled for a period of not less than one year (Borum et al., 2010). Data from NORC had found that 81.0% of respondents supported expelling threatening, violent, and unstable students (Smith, 2002).

Pennsylvania Section 1317.2 Possession of Weapons [on School Property] Prohibited stated that a school district or technical school shall expel any student determined to have brought or possessed a weapon on any school property, school-sponsored activity, transportation vehicle, or school-sponsored activity for no less than one year. These weapons under § 912. Possession of weapons on school property included but were not limited to knives, cutting instruments, firearms, or other instruments capable of inflicting serious bodily injury. School locations included elementary or secondary publicly funded educational institutions, and any elementary or secondary private or parochial schools licensed by the Department of Education.

There had also been legislation passed that did not specify schools directly but provided overall protection to the communities in which they resided. Federal statute 18 USC § 924(c) prohibited the use of a firearm in relation to committing a drug felony or a federal crime of violence or 18 USC §§842(h); 922(i) & (u) which made it illegal to receive, possess, conceal,

and store stolen ammunition and firearms.

Federal legislation passed in 1996 prevented the CDC from funding research for injury prevention and control if it was used for advocating or promoting firearm control (Katsiyannis et al., 2023). The FBI reported that out of the mass shootings between 2007 and 2013, 67% of the incidents had ended prior to law enforcement arriving (McCarthy, 2014).

Current law in the United States only covered licensed gun dealers, but about 40% of the firearm sales and transfers had taken place at gun shows and between individuals with private sales, resulting in approximately 6.6 million firearms being sold every year without background checks (McCarthy, 2015). Pennsylvania State Statute § 6120 had provided protection to ammunition or firearm manufacturers, trade associations, or dealers by not allowing any political subdivision to bring or maintain an action at law or in court where the parties were responsible for damages, abatement, injunctive relief, or remedies resulting from the lawful design or manufacture of ammunition or firearms or the lawful marketing or sales to the public.

Regarding school shootings and violence, schools had relied on increasing security measures, hiring more school resource officers (SROs), and creating zero-tolerance policies to curb violence. Such measures included controlled access to facilities, use of security cameras, and issuance of badges or picture IDs (Katsiyannis et al., 2023).

Media

According to the Center for Media Education, by the time children completed elementary school, they had been witness to more than 100,000 acts of violence on television, including 8,000 murders (Garbarino et al., 2002). A positive correlation between television violence and aggressive behavior was found (Paik & Comstock, 1994). It had been identified that even brief children's exposure to violent materials in the media increased their aggressive behaviors over

the longer term (Brocato et al., 2014). Aggression could be verbal, physical, or both and aimed or conducted at any group or individual (Vyas & Babu, 2022).

Elementary school children spent a sizable amount of their time in front of a screen watching TV or playing video games, with the typical 8- to 10-year-old watching TV or playing video games for 3 hours and 41 minutes per day (Gentile et al., 2012). Another study found that youth spent most of their waking hours in two activities: school and media. These children spent an average of 40 hours a week in front of screens and other media, with social media becoming the progressive technology that provided a global impact on the prevalence of violence (Vyas & Babu, 2022).

News stations had dedicated an enormous amount of their resources and airtime to cover crime within their respective viewing markets. By focusing heavily on crime stories, news media outlets effectively constructed a subjective reality that made the viewing audience believe that crime was more prevalent than it was (Parham-Payne, 2014). The emergence of different social media services such as Facebook and Twitter, along with countless other forums, including photo and video sharing sites, had become an integral part of the new media landscape where consumers could also become the producers and distributors of content (Nasi et al., 2020). Research conducted by Pew Research Center concluded that 62% of U.S. adults got their news from social media. It was also found that the level of violence in commercials was higher than the levels of violence in programming, with the highest levels being in the "spots" for upcoming programs (Shanahan, Hermans, & Hyman, 2003).

A smaller pool of research existed examining the correlation between video game violence and real-life violence such as assaults, bullying, or dating violence (Ferguson, 2014). Certain children may have been at higher risk for negative outcomes if they were exposed to gun

violence. These groups included those who were injured by gun violence, those who witnessed acts at close distances, those exposed to high levels of violence in their communities or schools, and those exposed to violent media (Garbarino et al., 2002). In a survey of 7,000 students conducted by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), it was reported that adolescents felt more of a sense of alienation, loss of humanity, and helplessness due to cyber violence than actual violence (So & Kim, 2021).

Social media has gained popularity with platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and dozens of others over the last two decades. At the beginning of 2016, more than 2.3 billion people had been using social media, with 1.9 billion of these users accessing the application from their mobile phones (Bialy, 2017). In developed countries, the problem of cyberbullying had emerged with more cases of teenager suicides (So & Kim, 2021). Such examples had been recent, such as a 14-year-old student in New Jersey who committed suicide in 2023. The student took her own life after a video was posted on social media showing her being attacked as she walked home with her boyfriend (Sloan, 2024). Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2011–2017 data had been examined for associations among high school students who self-reported suicide risk behaviors and experiences with bullying. These high-school students were 4.64 times more likely to have experienced bullying electronically. Ninth grade and female students were more likely than others to experience suicide risk behaviors and bullying (Blakeslee et al., 2021).

Violent video games had increased aggression in females and males, adults, and children, in experimental and nonexperimental studies, with aggressive cognitions being significantly higher across all areas (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Exposure was found to be a causal risk factor for aggressive cognition and aggressive behavior with a decrease in empathy (Anderson et

al., 2010) and helped to increase youth aggression (Paolini, 2015).

Exposure to violent video games created more hostility and arguments with teachers, physical fights, and poor school performance (Gentile et al., 2012). Boys were more likely to play video games, especially violent ones, which helped them develop by empowering and mastering new environments, expressing power and fame fantasies, emotional regulation, social tools, and learning new skills (Olson, Kutner, & Warner, 2008).

There had been over 100 studies that examined video game violence's influence on aggression and other related outcomes, but many had come under scrutiny by Borum and criticism (Ferguson, 2014). Media violence exposure resulted in a significant increase in the viewer's aggressive behavior, but the results were not uniform across all studies (Wood, Wong, & Chachere, 1991). One study found that depression, peer influences, antisocial personality, and parental aggression predicted youth violence more than violent media (Ferguson, San Miguel, & Hartley, 2009).

The term violent video game itself might have been purposefully loaded, distorting objective scientific inquiry and public policy as the term implied a uniformity of games within this category. The boundaries were so ill-defined within its definition that almost all video games could have been considered violent, with some scholars claiming that many games contained violence (Ferguson, 2014).

Mental Health

The problem with tying mental health illness to the gun control debate was that people assumed those with mental illnesses were more prone to violence than those without these issues (Wolf & Rosen, 2015). Unlike medical illnesses or conditions, those diagnosed with or even perceived to have a mental illness were often viewed by the public not only as having the

potential to become violent but also as posing a significant risk of violence (Sabella, 2014). It was also commonplace for commentators to assert that gun violence was a “public health problem” (Cook & Pollack, 2017). Research indicated that approximately 18% of children and adolescents had a mental health disorder, and approximately 5% were severely emotionally disturbed (Dikel, 2012). Lower socioeconomic status also reduced the opportunity for early intervention as it negatively affected access to health care or mental health services, thus limiting detection, referral, and treatment opportunities (Lenier et al., 2018). A 2019 preliminary report released by the National Policing Institute (NPI) found that public schools, high schools, and schools located in suburban areas were targeted most often, regardless of whether the planned shooting was carried out or not (Winch et al., 2024).

Aggressive behaviors among children were becoming an increasingly important and challenging topic in mental health care. These behaviors tended to start in early childhood and had been observed in up to 72% of children from ages 12–16. Evidence suggested that should these aggressive behaviors have become norms, the risk for serious problems, including school failure, drug addiction, and early pregnancies in adolescence, had been three times higher than for individuals who possessed better coping mechanisms (Lenier et al., 2018).

A nationwide survey found that 16.2% of all students had carried a weapon (e.g., firearm, knife, or club) to school. Further analysis found the demographics of these students were 16% heterosexual, 18.9% were gay, lesbian, and bisexual (Kann et al., 2016). According to Paolini’s review, most attacks were premeditated, with 61% of school shooters carrying out attacks to “get revenge,” and 81% of attackers held a grievance against another person at the time of the attack (Paolini, 2015). One study found that two-thirds of school shooters obtained their firearms from their own home or the home of a relative (Towers et al., 2015).

There were legislative proposals and reforms that would prohibit those deemed dangerous with an escalated risk of violence. Federal law currently did not allow firearm ownership to those who had been involuntarily committed or defendants who had been adjudicated for mental health reasons (Hodges et al., 2021).

Pennsylvania State Law required the notification of mental health adjudication, treatment, drug use, or addiction to notify the Pennsylvania State Police of the identity of any individual who had been found to be incompetent or as a mental defective or committed to a mental institution under the act of July 9, 1976 (P.L.817, No.143), which was also known as the Mental Health Procedures Act in regards to the possession of firearms 18 U.S.C. § 922(g)(4). The judge must have provided this information to the Pennsylvania State Police within seven days of such reasons for adjudication. However, upon appeal, the court could have had the records of involuntary commitment of those discharged from a mental health facility based on the initial review of physicians that there was no severe mental disability in a signed confirmation of determination.

While strengthening gun laws had been an important piece of reducing gun violence, the greater issue was the need for providing funds for mental health treatment and the ability for those in need to have access to services (Wolf & Rosen, 2015). In 2019, 83% of respondents believed that a “fair amount” or “great deal” of blame should have been assigned to the failures of the mental health system and its ability to alert others of dangerous individuals who had committed a mass shooting (Gallup, 2019).

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the shooters of Columbine High School, were both wounded by law enforcement and committed suicide. Harris had been characterized as a psychopath while Klebold had been described as withdrawn and moody during his teenage years.

Klebold's journal entries were reviewed by professionals who viewed them as clear indications of depression and suicidal ideations (Sabella, 2014). According to the FBI review of 63 active shooters from 2000 to 2013, 62 percent had mental health stressors, which were defined as struggling with depression, anxiety, and paranoia in their daily lives. However, the FBI only verified 25 percent of these cases with a documented diagnosis by a mental health professional (Bast & DeSimone, 2019). However, most school shooters had no previous record of criminal justice activities, had had access to guns at home, and may have dealt with a recent significant loss in their families (Paolini, 2015).

The gunman of the supermarket shooting in Buffalo, NY, believed in the "Great Replacement Theory" where Jews were conspiring to commit "White Genocide" by having inferior races outbreed the superior White race in a 180 manifesto that cited many psychologists who looked at scientific differences in race (Jackson, 2022).

Research had identified several measures that should have been considered for schools working with students with various behaviors and experiences seen as negative. Such measures included access to mental health services, the implementation of school safety initiatives that focused on both psychological and physical safety, trained school safety and crisis teams, and policies that limited exposure to media violence among children, youths, and vulnerable populations (Teasley, 2018).

Parents

Parents had various views when it came to the subject of firearms. A study about parents and their beliefs about children and gun safety found that 98.8% of parents believed that safe gun storage and the separation of firearms and ammunition during storage would help protect their children. The same study found that only 65.8% of parents found that firearm training programs

would be helpful for adults. If children had gun-handling courses, 35.4% of parents would agree that it would help, while 45.2% thought that gun safety education in school would be useful (Howard, 2005).

A study in Maryland found that gun ownership ranged from 27% in the suburbs to 53% in rural areas. Half of gun-owning parents believed that education and supervision were the best method of preventing gun injuries to children older than twelve (Webster et al., 1992).

A study conducted in 2022 found that among 3,757 parents with one child younger than 18, 7% were not worried at all about a school shooting happening at their child's school, 24% were not too concerned, 37% were somewhat concerned, 13% were very concerned, and 19% were extremely concerned. Based on ethnicity, 50% of Hispanic, 40% of Black, and 35% of Asian parents felt very or extremely worried compared to 22% of white parents. Forty-nine percent of lower-income parents felt very or extremely worried about a school shooting at their child's school (Hurst, 2022).

Summary

School shootings and gun violence continued to be a growing concern within the United States. Various groups had their own opinions on the best way to reduce this violence. Some believed that there should have been more gun control, while others believed that there were enough laws on the books. Others believed that mental health was a driving force and that students did not have the resources when help was needed. Some studies showed that violent media and video games were also to blame for the increase in school violence. Although these incidents were traumatic for all those involved, the facts showed that these were very rare occurrences that were highlighted by extensive and continued news coverage or sharing on social

media. Although rare, it was still believed that many of these incidents could have been prevented.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Introduction

A qualitative research design was chosen for this study as it was generally well-suited for an exploratory analysis of barriers preventing new legislative gun reform in Pennsylvania. A phenomenological approach was typically used when a researcher sought to learn about the lived experiences of a certain group of people who had experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, a qualitative phenomenological study was utilized to understand and describe the shared experiences that determined the perspectives of parents on school shootings, aiming to understand the barriers to preventing gun reform in Pennsylvania. By using a qualitative approach, respondents' answers created a broad analysis of their life experiences that shaped their thoughts on gun reform. This study's central research question was "What were the barriers preventing new legislative gun reform in Pennsylvania from the perspective of parents to mitigate school shootings?" It included participation from nine residents of the state of Pennsylvania, who were parents of a dependent child currently attending a K-12 public, charter, or private school, or a dependent child attending a public or private college or university, to gain a better understanding of parents' views.

This research was important to better understand the lived experiences and barriers that persistently kept lawmakers from agreeing on and creating gun reform. The findings of this study could be used by lawmakers to shape policies that reflected the populations they represented. It also provided lawmakers the ability to better understand why their constituents held those beliefs on a psychological level. Furthermore, the information learned in this study could also provide educators from K-12 and secondary educational institutions with information that could shape their policies to better serve their students, parents, and communities.

Legislation on sensitive topics was often won or defeated by a narrow majority. Regarding firearms, democratic views often leaned one way, while republicans leaned in the opposite direction. It was often the small fraction of those views who fell in the center or were independent that determined the outcome by their choice of leaning left or right. This group was often persuasive. This research was important to understand how those with “their heels dug in” thought and how they could be persuaded or take the opportunity to understand the other side's arguments.

Role of Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative research was an important matter to be considered in the successful pursuit of investigating any social phenomena. In this study, the researcher was highly inclined and qualified to pursue the investigation because he was also a parent of two young children as well as a firearm owner. He had encountered stressful experiences, pain, and frustration from viewing the tragedies of school shootings, in which he could also relate to the feelings of the participants. The researcher possessed abilities and aptitude in writing, keen observations, and an interest in psychology, while having a deep concern for his fellow citizens and their safety. Although he had some personal biases on the subject and a high level of empathy for individuals, it was his role as a researcher to be mindful of these biases while ensuring that ethical research guidelines, along with current theories and studies within the existing literature on this topic, were respected and considered within the context of the study.

With regards to the researcher's basic roles, he followed the aim of qualitative inquiry, which was for researchers who were willing to commit extensive time to collect data, engage in data analysis, practice reflexivity, and write long passages by themselves. As a researcher, his

roles were that of an interviewer, transcriber, translator, analyst, and encoder. As an interviewer, he established rapport with the participants while using personal empathy to make them feel more willing to share their experiences and thoughts. During the interview and observation, he applied techniques, asked probing questions, actively listened, and processed the information, continuing to ask more probing questions to reach deeper levels of conversation. As the transcriber and encoder, he transcribed all the recorded interviews, combining them with notes taken during the interview. As the analyst, he employed suitable analysis methods and procedures fitted for qualitative research, such as thematic analysis, numeration, and cross-case analysis.

To provide validity to the study, the researcher kept notes during the recorded interviews. All interviewees were asked the same base questions with additional follow-up questions at the conclusion of the base set. After the conclusion of the interviews, they were transcribed. The researcher reviewed each interview and its transcription to verify that the notes matched. The interviewer kept a journal of their thoughts and notated any biases they may have felt during the interview, which were published in their findings.

Positionality Statement

As a qualitative researcher, it was important to provide potential biases or conflicts of interest that could interfere with the study's results. Gun reform had been of particular interest to the researcher since he was a young adult. Although he did not grow up owning a firearm or having parents with one in the household, he was exposed to firearms through scouting, where he learned to use and respect them. Later in life, as a young adult, he remembered watching the events of Columbine unfold on live TV. It was traumatic to watch, but one that was rare at that

time. That was until 2007, when a shooter killed 32 people at Virginia Tech. One of the deceased victims was a graduate of his high school alma mater and a good friend of his sister.

He was born and raised in New Jersey, where firearm legislation tended to be stricter than in other states in the country. Even though he was exposed to firearms at a young age, his family and friends never really used or talked about them. When he moved to Pennsylvania, that changed as he made new friends and met his wife's family. Many of them lived in places that were miles away from the closest metropolitan city. They had thoughts and ways of life that were new to him, ones he had never experienced in New Jersey. He became more familiar with firearms and purchased some for his own personal use. During that time, his thoughts and beliefs were solidified on the rights of gun owners and their importance.

In 2021, his spouse gave birth to their daughter. For any parent, the birth of a child is an amazing experience, and one realizes the innocence that children start their lives with. Almost a year to the date of her first birthday, the shooter in Uvalde murdered 19 students. This act and the birth of his daughter made him revisit his beliefs on firearm ownership and gun reform. By being a parent whose life experiences with firearms had spanned the spectrum, he felt an obligation to conduct a study that helped understand the beliefs of two groups of people and brought them together to stop gun violence in schools and the communities they lived in.

Study Population

The parents who were eligible to participate in this study included those who were eighteen years of age or older, resided in the northeast area of Pennsylvania, and had at least one child physically attending a K-12 public, charter, or private school, or a child attending a public or private college or university. Parents who resided outside of Pennsylvania or had all their

children attending a cyber school or were homeschooling their children were excluded from the study. In phenomenological studies, it is recommended that the number of participants range from five to twenty-five individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study included nine participants, which was adequate to reach saturation.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

The participant letter was approved by the Marywood University Institutional Review Board. A solicitation for participation was posted on the researcher's personal LinkedIn profile. The recruitment post was sent on September 30th, October 2nd, and October 4th. These postings were sufficient to reach the required number of participants. The posting contained a detailed description of the eligibility requirements, which included the following: age of 18 years or older, residency in the state of Pennsylvania, and being a parent of a dependent child attending a K-12 public, charter, or private school, or a dependent child attending a public or private college or university. A link to the participant letter and other documentation for potential participants to review was also provided.

For the study, a dependent child was defined in accordance with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) definition of a dependent child, which is an individual under the age of 19, or under the age of 24 if a full-time college student, or any age if permanently and totally disabled (IRS, 2023).

A link was included in the post for interested participants to complete an online form, which was electronically collected by the researcher. The researcher was not privy to any individual parent names or email addresses until they submitted the electronic consent form.

Individuals who met the inclusion criteria and completed the study were emailed an electronic \$10 gift card for their participation.

Instrumentation

A qualitative design was necessary for this research due to the complexity of the phenomena in question. The parent population in Pennsylvania was diverse and encompassed individuals from a variety of backgrounds and life experiences. The development of each human psyche is a complicated process that spans a lifetime and shapes individuals' opinions and views. The utilization of qualitative interviews was required to further explore this phenomenon and identify emerging themes within the target population. Each eligible participant was asked pre-selected questions in a semi-structured interview and was asked a selection of standard questions about their personal upbringing, the environment in which they were raised, their views on firearm reform, and their feelings and views regarding their children attending school. Additional questions were asked to explore responses further and identify potential new information or emerging themes. Since the researcher was creating the questions for this qualitative study, an expert in the field was asked to assess the validity of the questionnaire and its use in this study, as no validity and reliability statistics were available for this instrument.

Procedure

The present study was open to any parent residing in the State of Pennsylvania, over the age of 18, who met the inclusion criteria listed above. The social media post contained the participant recruitment letter, explained the purpose of the study, and outlined its corresponding expectations. Parents who fit the eligibility criteria and decided to participate submitted their personal demographic information and then started the online form.

Prospective participants entered their personal demographic information and preferred means of contact. The collected demographic information was used to screen and confirm that participants met the guidelines for participation in the study. This demographic information included age, state of residence, and the number of children currently attending a public or private K-12 school, college, or university.

Participants were randomly selected from those who were willing to participate in the study. To ensure a selection of participants that encompassed various political parties, 33.3% of participants were chosen from those who identified as Democrats, 33.3% from those who identified as Republicans, and 33.3% from those who identified as any other category.

At the end of the form, participants were prompted to provide their email addresses, which would be used to send the contact details, date, and time of the interview, as well as the \$10 electronic gift card incentive after completion of the interview. The participant was notified in the recruitment letter and consent form that their personal information would be deidentified in the study, and their contact information would only be used to send them a small “thank you” gift after completing the study.

The researcher reviewed the responses from the survey and contacted the participants via their preferred form of communication within the period listed in the participant letter. A method for conducting the interview was coordinated, such as via Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or another platform. A confirmation email was sent with the interview date, time, and details.

Prior to the interview, consent was obtained from participants, as well as authorization for recording. A semi-structured interview was used for data collection, consisting of questions

listed in Appendix E. Before any interview questions were asked by the researcher, information regarding confidentiality was provided to each participant to ensure informed consent.

Data Collection

All interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or another platform during a 30–60-minute interview. The duration of the interview depended on the length of the participants' responses. The interviews were open-ended, with detailed notes taken during each semi-structured interview. At the conclusion of the interviews, all participants were emailed a \$10 electronic gift card.

After the conclusion of the interviews, all records of the study were kept private and confidential, and any responses by the participants were made unidentifiable for any use, written or verbal, or a presentation or report. Only the main researcher and the three advisors on the doctoral committee had access to the research records. All reasonable efforts were made to protect identifiable information and to keep all electronic and transcribed information confidential. All electronic records were stored securely with an encryption program, such as BitLocker, and stored for a maximum period of three years, after which the information was destroyed through file deletion. Any handwritten notes taken during the interview process were shredded and destroyed as well. The participant consent form detailed this information for each participant.

Analysis and Validity of Data

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using the transcription functionality of Microsoft Teams or Zoom as the first step in the data analysis. All interviews were audio-

recorded without utilizing the video feature for participant anonymity. The non-use of video on these platforms aimed to maintain consistency with phone communication, ensuring no bias from facial expressions or ease/difficulty of speaking to a participant on highly sensitive topics.

The researcher reviewed the transcripts and coded them to identify recurring themes that emerged among the participants' responses. Coding began with larger segments of the transcribed text. After the initial coding was reviewed, larger themes were further divided into smaller segments, and differences between segments were coded. During analysis, the coding was used to develop a description of experiences and themes.

Issues of Trustworthiness

To provide trustworthiness in data collection, theory triangulation of literature was used from multiple sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of the research, in addition to the controls listed above in the Analysis and Validity of Data section.

Ethical Considerations

The participants in this study were found through solicitation on LinkedIn, a social media platform. Each potential participant filled out a demographic form to confirm they were eligible to participate in the study. All potential participants were provided a pseudonym, which was used during the study for confidentiality. All transcribed interview data, recordings, videos, or other electronic files were retained for three years and destroyed thereafter.

Due to the nature of the research topic, participants were informed that at any time during the interview, they were not required to answer a question or could stop the interview. The

researcher, at no time, provided “care” to a participant and did not need to direct any participant to professional services for assistance.

Chapter 4

Results

Introduction

This chapter contained the findings of the phenomenological study conducted to answer the following research question:

From the perspective of parents, what were the barriers preventing new legislative gun reform in Pennsylvania to mitigate school shootings?

The purpose of this study was to contribute qualitative insights into the participants' thoughts, as most of the research on this topic had been strictly quantitative, providing only statistical analysis of results. The National Research Collaborative on Firearm Violence highlighted the need for qualitative firearms research to identify factors that influenced individual and group firearm behavior, which was often lost in purely quantitative research (Lanterman & Blithe, 2018). By having various qualitative answers, stakeholders were able to gain a better understanding of policy administration and success.

A qualitative phenomenological study was utilized to understand and describe the shared experiences that determined the perspectives of parents on school shootings in order to understand the barriers in preventing gun reform in Pennsylvania. By using a qualitative approach, respondents' answers created a broad analysis of their life experiences that shaped their thoughts on gun reform.

Participants

An invitation to participate in the study had been posted on LinkedIn, which included the purpose of the study, a demographic questionnaire, and a consent to participate form. The initial and only post generated 136 requests to participate in the survey. From this group, 31

participants were removed from consideration for missing contact information, 4 participants were removed for being under the age of 18, and 2 participants were removed for not meeting the qualifications of the study. 43 participants were removed for duplicate responses. Table A showed the gender identity of the remaining 58 participants, which included 26 identifying as females, 31 identifying as males, and 1 identifying as non-binary.

Table A: Gender Identity of Participants (N = 58)

Male	31
Female	26
Non-binary	1

The participants were also asked about their political affiliation, with 26 identifying as Democrats, 12 as Republicans, and 18 as independents or with no affiliation, as listed in Table B.

Table B: Political Affiliation of Participants (N = 58)

Democrat	26
Independent	16
Republican	14
No affiliation	2

The participants' race and ethnicity demographics are listed in Table C.

Table C: Race and Ethnicity of Participants (N = 58)

White	23
Black or African American	19
American Indian or Alaska Native	5
Two or More Races	5
Hispanic or Latino	4
Asian American	2

The ages of the respondents ranged from 19 to 65 years, with the median age being 33, as listed in Table D.

Table D: Age of Participants (N = 58)

33	6
28	4
36	4
37	4
40	4
24	3
27	3
31	3
41	3
45	3
21	2
22	2
23	2
26	2
46	2
20	1
25	1
29	1
30	1
32	1
34	1
35	1
43	1
50	1
55	1
65	1

To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, each individual was assigned a pseudonym. This measure ensured that their identities remained private throughout the study and analysis. During the interviews, which ranged from 30 to 55 minutes, participants expressed varying levels of comfort with certain topics, revealing insights into their personal feelings and knowledge on the subject matter.

Several participants had deeper, more engaged responses to questions related to the experiences and actions of those within the educational system. For example, participants who worked in schools or had personal experiences with school-related issues were particularly responsive to questions such as:

- "Do you feel school officials are doing enough to prevent school shootings? Why?"
- "Do you feel that public officials are doing enough to prevent school shootings? Why?"
- "What do you think is the biggest obstacle to preventing school shootings? Why?"

These individuals provided thoughtful insights, often based on their direct experiences and observations in educational settings, making their answers more nuanced and reflective of their personal knowledge.

On the other hand, there were certain questions that participants either hesitated to answer or responded less confidently. Those questions were:

- "What are your thoughts on school shootings in the United States?"
- "What laws do you think the United States has regarding firearms?"
- "What laws do you think the state of Pennsylvania has regarding firearms?"

Some participants shied away from the first question, expressing discomfort or uncertainty about discussing such a sensitive and emotionally charged topic. As for the questions on firearm laws, some participants admitted that they weren't well-versed in the specific legal frameworks in place, especially at the state level, and offered responses that reflected a lack of detailed knowledge.

Although topics surrounding firearms often sparks sensitive and heated debates in society, it is worth noting that no participant was derogatory towards the owners or individuals who did not own firearms. Despite differing beliefs and political affiliations, participants displayed a respectful tone when responding to the questions. There was no rudeness or derogatory language used towards others with opposing views or differing perspectives.

Participant 1 - (Carissa):

Carissa was born in 1988, identifies as a female, is Caucasian, and has no political affiliation. She and her husband live in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, with their young child who attends kindergarten. They currently possess and keep firearms in their home. Her highest level of education is a high school diploma, and she is employed as a distribution center area manager.

Participant 2 - (Cullen):

Cullen was born in 1992, identifies as a male, is Caucasian, and has no political affiliation. He and his wife live in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, with their children, who attended public school but are currently homeschooled by his wife. They possess and keep firearms in their home. His highest level of education is a high school diploma. Cullen was

previously enlisted in the United States Marine Corps as a Live Fire Officer in Charge and is now employed as a distribution operations manager.

Participant 3 - (Ryan):

Ryan was born in 1980, identifies as a male, is Caucasian, and is a registered Republican. He and his wife live in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, with their young child who attends kindergarten. They possess and keep firearms in their home. Ryan's highest level of education is a master's degree, and he is employed as a corporate training manager.

Participant 4 - (Jose):

Jose was born in 1962, identifies as a male, is Hispanic, and has no political affiliation. He immigrated from Peru during his youth and became a United States citizen. He and his wife live in Lehigh County, Pennsylvania, with their children who attend public school. They possess and keep firearms in their home. Jose's highest level of education is a high school diploma, and he is employed as a facilities maintenance manager.

Participant 5 - (Jennifer):

Jennifer was born in 1993, identifies as a female, is Caucasian, and is registered as a Democrat. She and her husband live in York County, Pennsylvania, with their two children who attend public school. They do not possess and keep firearms in their home. Jennifer's highest level of education is a master's degree, and she is a stay-at-home mother.

Participant 6 - (James):

James was born in 1978, identifies as a male, is Caucasian, and is registered as a Democrat. He is divorced and lives in Snyder County, Pennsylvania. He and his ex-wife share custody of their child, who attends public school. James does not possess and keeps firearms in

his home. His highest level of education is a bachelor's degree, and he is employed as a retail store manager.

Participant 7 - (Evan):

Evan was born in 1980, identifies as a male, is Caucasian, and is registered as a Democrat. He and his wife live in Union County, Pennsylvania, with their three children who attend public school. They do not possess and keep firearms in their home. Evan's highest level of education is a bachelor's degree, and he works as a foreman at a landscaping company.

Participant 8 - (Marty):

Marty was born in 1992, identifies as a male, is Caucasian, and is a registered Republican. He and his wife live in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, with their young child who attends kindergarten. They possess and keep firearms in their home. Marty's highest level of education is an associate's degree, and he is employed as an IT specialist.

Participant 9 - (Ashley):

Ashley was born in 1991, identifies as a female, is Caucasian, and is a registered Republican. She and her husband live in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, with their young child who attends kindergarten. They possess and keep firearms in their home. Ashley's highest level of education is a master's degree, and she is employed as a secondary school teacher.

Findings

This research sought to discover ways in which Pennsylvania parents of school students perceived various facets of school shootings and firearm legislation. Data analysis revealed several themes that were presented and discussed. These themes included their thoughts on

firearm possession, their knowledge of firearm legislation, the ability of local and state officials to protect schools, and their willingness to compromise on firearm issues.

Reasons for Firearm Possession

Carissa held a strong view regarding her right to own a firearm for personal protection and hunting, which she believed was rooted in the United States Constitution. She said she felt that it allows citizens to protect themselves from the government or any unforeseen circumstances. She expressed gratitude for ordinary citizens being able to own firearms for self-protection: “This is my right, and nothing you can say or do is going to stop me from having it. In America, we protect our liberties and remain as free as possible.”

Ryan shared a similar view, believing “every citizen has a right to bear arms.” He said he felt that people should be able to own firearms if they see fit, but the process should be done legally. He also spoke about using firearms to protect his family and to hunt. Jose believed firearm ownership was “a great freedom” that we should enjoy, especially in today’s “crazy world.”

Marty saw firearms as a necessary evil, noting that many gun owners are responsible. He also believed firearms were originally created by the founding fathers to protect citizens from the government. He added, “They can be dangerous, but in the right hands, they’re the perfect tool to defend yourself or defend others.” After a shooting at a local retailer the previous year, Marty began carrying a concealed firearm for personal safety.

Jennifer believed in the Second Amendment’s protection of the right to own firearms for both self-defense and providing for one’s family. She stressed personal responsibility in firearm ownership, asserting that if a firearm is used in a crime, the owner should be held accountable.

Evan, while acknowledging responsible gun owners, argued that the U.S. suffers from an obsession with firearms, viewing it as a cultural issue. He believed that the real attraction to guns wasn't just for protection or hunting, but for the power they provide and the feeling of powerlessness without them.

Cullen viewed firearms as part of American history, essential for protection from both domestic and foreign threats. He cited a Japanese admiral, Isoroku Yamamoto, who said, "We can never invade America because there would be a rifle behind every blade of grass." Ashley, agreeing with the idea of protection, said she felt that since law enforcement and the military use firearms, the public should also have the right to own them for protection and hunting.

Most participants grew up around firearms, making them feel "normal" and familiar. Karissa was taught gun safety as a child and engaged in target practice and hunting with her family. Ryan also grew up hunting and took safety courses on his family's farm. He emphasized that he had never had a firearm-related incident and ensured his firearms were kept locked up at home.

Marty received his first BB gun at age nine and, as he grew older, practiced with larger firearms, eventually receiving a hunting permit at 12. Ashley, who also started hunting at 12, took a hunter safety course. Jose enjoyed hunting with friends as a hobby. Jennifer had shot at a gun range but had never owned a firearm or had one shared by a family member. She said that with training and confidence, she would consider owning a firearm.

Cullen, who had no exposure to firearms as a child due to his father's criminal background, first fired a firearm at age 14 during a safety course. His interest in marksmanship grew when he joined the military, and he came to enjoy target shooting. Evan had no experience

with firearms as a child, though he played with toy guns. He was fine with people owning firearms for hunting and protection, but advocated for ownership restrictions. James, who had only shot a BB gun, believed that those who are allowed firearms should be able to use them for hunting and self-defense.

Banning Firearms

Carissa acknowledged that some people advocate for banning firearms due to personal experiences with gun violence. James, agreeing, stated, “Banning firearms is a reaction to things like school shootings. School shootings are horrible, but banning firearms will not solve the issue.”

Ryan believed banning firearms would not solve the problem, as criminals would still find ways to acquire them. Marty thought that people who want to ban firearms are misguided, as law-abiding citizens would not attempt to obtain guns illegally, whereas criminals would. He, along with Ryan, argued that the solution should be stricter background checks rather than a complete ban. Ryan suggested limiting firearm ownership based on mental health, a point Marty agreed with, though he emphasized the need to be cautious about infringing on personal privacy.

Ashley opposed an outright ban on firearms but believed certain types, like the AR-15, should be restricted for recreational use. She argued that those who obtain firearms legally and take proper care to secure them should have the right to own them. James believed that the U.S. Constitution guarantees the right to own firearms, but government oversight was necessary, comparing the situation to the First Amendment’s limitations on speech.

Cullen opposed banning firearms, emphasizing that the government should not decide what individuals can own. “If you want to own a sailboat with a cannon on it, then by all means,

do so.” He advocated for better training and mental health screening during the background process. Jennifer also opposed a blanket ban, expressing concern over who would oversee such a law.

Cullen saw ignorance as a factor behind calls to ban firearms, arguing that people didn’t understand the history of guns or the enjoyment they can bring as a hobby. He also believed that restrictions should apply to those with mental instability or those who do not store firearms securely. “Truthfully, I don’t love the idea of banning firearms for anyone,” he said, reflecting on his experience teaching marksmanship in the military.

Jennifer suggested that people want to ban firearms because they believe guns make it easier to hurt others, thinking that banning them might save lives. Evan believed some people advocate for banning firearms because they fear gun violence, while others, particularly power-hungry politicians, might want to reduce firearms to maintain control.

Understanding of Gun Laws

Carissa admitted she was not familiar with state and federal firearm legislation, though she knew about age limitations and background checks. James thought some states had too many restrictions, while others had too few.

Ryan and Marty also expressed limited knowledge of gun laws. Ryan admitted his understanding of gun legislation was lacking, and Marty only knew about background checks. Ashley, although not well-versed in laws, was aware of background check requirements. Jennifer, too, was not educated on gun laws but knew about the Second Amendment, Red Flag Laws, and the background check process.

Jose, however, had more knowledge of firearms laws, mentioning background checks, licenses, restrictions on types of weapons, and the "stand your ground" law. Cullen demonstrated the deepest understanding, referencing various illegal firearm attachments, restrictions on transferring firearms to family members, and open and concealed carry permits. He gained this knowledge through his military service and personal experience with firearms.

James, while unsure of specific laws, believed that firearm ownership and regulation should be state-determined, reflecting the differences between urban and rural areas. He argued that if a state bans firearms, people could move to another state, but if the federal government did, relocation would be impossible.

Gun Legislation and Reform

All participants agreed that a more thorough background check process was necessary during firearm purchases, with an emphasis on criminal history, mental health, and drug use. Karissa said she felt that current procedures were inadequate and advocated for stricter laws, including periodic background checks.

Ryan agreed that while criminals would still find ways to obtain firearms, law-abiding citizens should undergo thorough screening, including mental health checks. Marty also supported mental health screenings, particularly for individuals with depression, anxiety, cognitive impairments, or suicidal tendencies. Evan similarly believed mental health evaluations should be part of the process.

Cullen suggested raising the legal age for firearm possession and carry permits to 25, citing brain development and mental maturity. Jose's concern was the "gun show loophole," where private sales do not require background checks.

School Shootings

Karissa supported having armed guards or trained, licensed school staff members carry firearms on school grounds. Ryan agreed that improved security protocols were necessary but emphasized the importance of greater accountability among parents and firearm owners. Marty also believed schools needed to be hardened, as victims are often unarmed and defenseless.

Cullen believed, like Ryan, that mental health played a key role in school shootings. Jose simply stated, "We need to address the root cause—mental health." Evan saw school shootings as a byproduct of the U.S.'s obsession with firearms. James believed that while there were too many shootings, no effective solution had been implemented without infringing on the Second Amendment.

Ashley, as a teacher, described the intense security measures at her school, including security guards, metal detectors, and X-ray screening for backpacks.

What Guides Their Views

All participants stated that their political affiliation did not influence their beliefs about firearm ownership, regulation, and school shootings. Many had grown up around firearms, learning to hunt or shoot through family experiences.

Karissa said she felt her views were shaped by the media and her community, while Ryan believed his views were solid due to his upbringing. Marty, despite changing his political party affiliation, maintained consistent views on firearms, only considering change after a catastrophic event.

Ashley, identifying as a Republican, understood the current issues with firearms but believed in access to them, always prioritizing what was best for her and her family. James, a Democrat, acknowledged his knowledge of firearms but believed in minimal government interference in gun laws, regardless of political events. Cullen based his views on personal experience and research, not political affiliation, arguing against banning firearms based on fear.

Jose's perspective on firearms had shifted from viewing them as a sport to recognizing their importance for personal protection, although political affiliation did not shape his views. Jennifer, now a parent, was more cautious about firearms but believed political parties should not influence the discussion. She would only support a ban if there were a perfect government system in place.

Evan, who had moved from an urban to a rural area, had shifted from advocating for a gun ban to supporting restrictions, particularly for responsible ownership. His political views did not shape his stance, but his concern for safety led him to favor restrictions based on trust and responsibility.

School and Political Leaders

Carissa believed things were going in the right direction and thought there should be more funding for metal detectors and security guards. She believed that all kids should be

screened upon entry to school grounds. She wanted teachers and guidance counselors to do more in both the physical and mental environment because “non-abused kids do not shoot up schools.” She thought identifying children with underlying issues was key to stopping school shootings. She did not think politicians were doing as much as they could because they were not affected by it, as their children, if they had any, attended more affluent schools.

Ryan did not think enough was being done to address school safety by political leaders. He thought they should have guards at certain doors checking people in and out through a secure process. They could use metal detectors, but there was much better technology out there that could be used. As for school districts, he believed it was hard to say because there were so many of them. However, he thought teachers and administrators did as much as they could with the resources provided.

Marty did not believe schools were doing enough and thought teachers should be able to carry firearms if trained and certified, or there should be armed security guards. In general, he did not hear or see much being done about it. He was unsure of any new measures that had been taken or new legislation passed locally or in the state.

Ashley said she felt that schools tried to do enough, and since she was a teacher, she participated in various exercises. In her school district, they practiced multiple evacuations and had active shooter drills throughout the year. They practiced a live simulation once or twice a year with a mock active shooter. They also had safety features in the classroom, such as panic buttons (restricted access), devices on the doors that blocked access to the classrooms, and other measures. She said she felt that school officials were trying their best with the resources they had available. She thought it was truly difficult to prevent a school shooting, as all shooters had

different motives behind their attacks. She believed her school was doing their best, but with over 2,500 students plus staff in one building, it was almost impossible. They had metal detectors and X-ray machines at two of the entrances of the school. However, there were multiple other entrances and exits throughout the school that could easily be opened by a shooter. Even though the school had cameras, she believed the time it would take to notice and have someone confront the shooter meant that most of the damage might already be done. However, she thought that legislators had no idea what happened in schools. They could mandate drills and training, but they did not understand how dynamic each school was.

Cullen did not feel that schools did enough, based on issues he and his family had with them in the past. He personally struggled through the school system due to being moved around by his family. He thought that school officials needed to look more into the mental health issues of students. He believed the government spent money on buying things that were not needed, such as bulletproof backpacks, and should instead spend money on mental health for students. The training he received in the military taught him there were two things to remember: “flight” and “fight.” “You need to get out as fast as you can, and if you cannot because the way is blocked, then you must find an equalizer or any type of weapon,” Cullen said. He thought we would be better off putting two trained officers at every school instead of what we currently spent money on.

Jennifer thought that they could work on bullying and improve therapy for kids to help them focus on anger management or how to cope with the student’s perceived injustices. Evan wasn’t sure about school officials doing enough, but he believed that public figures needed to find a way to change the culture of firearm obsession and aggression. He thought there needed to be more availability and outreach of mental health services. James said that he really didn’t know

because there were so many school districts, teachers, and administrators. “I would imagine some are doing enough, and others need to do more.” It was hard to determine and put a blanket statement on whether this one was doing well and this one was not, as they were not tested until a shooting happened, and those were rare.

Sending Children to School

Carissa did not homeschool at the time but would have loved to. However, she most likely would be unable to have that privilege. Her plan was to arm her kids with knowledge respective to their age, so they knew what to do if something like that happened. She thought more people needed to make sure to speak up about things they saw that were suspicious or worrisome at public meetings.

Ryan said he felt comfortable sending his daughter to the public school system because they did a good job with metal detectors and security. When the district had events at the high school, he said he felt comfortable being there after the security check.

Marty did not feel comfortable, and it was something on his mind each day. Even if the school or community had a plan in place, he was always concerned about how well executed it would be.

Ashley said she felt comfortable sending her daughter to school even though there were school shootings. She believed that most school teachers and administrators would do anything to protect their students.

Cullen did not feel comfortable sending his children to school, but he believed there were many other things that schools fell short of, which was why they now homeschooled their children.

Jennifer thought, “No, but not entirely because of the school shooting aspect, but the social contagion in general. It is a concern, but not the main point of anxiety.”

Evan did not feel comfortable either, not because of firearms themselves, but because he “personally knew too many unstable people who owned guns and had aggressive attitudes.”

Jose absolutely did not feel comfortable sending his children to school and thought there were enough problems with school shootings all over the country.

James repeated that it was hard to say because there were so many school districts. He was somewhat indifferent about sending his child to school because it was such a random act, and all you could hope was that it was not your child if something happened.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to contribute qualitative insight into the participants' thoughts since most of the research on this topic was strictly quantitative, which only provided statistical analysis of results. This chapter included a discussion of the major findings of the study as they related to the literature on firearm legislation, school and mass shootings, and the theoretical framework, the limitations of the study, and a discussion on the application of the findings. The chapter concluded with areas for future research and a summary.

Discussion

This research sought to understand the perspectives of parents of Pennsylvania students and what drove their thought process on firearm legislation. The data analysis revealed several themes related to the participants' beliefs about firearms. These themes included their thoughts on firearm possession, their knowledge of firearm legislation, the ability of local and state officials to protect schools, and their willingness to compromise on firearm issues.

Firearm Possession and Storage

A prominent theme that emerged from the data was that a significant number of participants, regardless of their political affiliations, expressed strong opposition to the idea of banning firearms. The belief that owning firearms was a constitutional right deeply rooted in American history was prevalent among the respondents. For many, this right was seen not only as a fundamental element of individual freedom but also as a vital part of the nation's culture and identity.

The Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution was frequently cited as the foundational basis for the belief that Americans should have the ability to possess firearms. However, the participants' views on firearms were not solely based on constitutional arguments. Many emphasized that owning firearms allowed them to protect their families, homes, and property from potential threats, a point of view that underscored the importance of self-defense. In rural and suburban areas, the ability to hunt and use firearms for sustenance was also frequently mentioned. Participants in these communities often regarded firearms as tools for securing food and maintaining a connection to the land.

While there was a strong consensus on the right to own firearms, the opinions about which types of firearms should be accessible to the general public varied. The majority of participants were opposed to the outright banning of firearms, with specific exceptions for particular categories. However, there was a minority group who said they felt that owners of certain types of firearms, particularly semi-automatic rifles (often referred to as AR-style rifles), should have been required to provide a valid and compelling reason for owning such weapons. These participants argued that, due to the sheer power and potential for harm associated with these firearms, there should have been stricter regulations governing their ownership.

In addition, some participants discussed laws regulating how firearms were stored, particularly in households with children or vulnerable individuals. Safe storage legislation was viewed as a critical step toward reducing accidents, suicides, and unauthorized access to firearms, especially in households where guns were present but not intended to be used for self-defense or hunting. Participants believed that secure storage laws, such as requirements for gun safes or trigger locks, would have helped ensure that children or individuals with unstable mental health would not have had easy access to firearms during moments of distress or crisis.

Mental Health and Firearm Background Checks

Despite these disagreements regarding specific types of firearms, there was a shared understanding among all participants that firearm legislation in the United States could have been significantly improved. This consensus focused primarily on the need for more stringent regulations that could have limited access to firearms, particularly for individuals who might have posed a risk to themselves or others. Many participants expressed support for the implementation of comprehensive and more robust background checks, which they said they felt could have helped ensure that only responsible, law-abiding citizens were allowed to purchase firearms. Substance abuse screenings were also viewed as essential, as many recognized the potential for firearms to be misused by individuals struggling with addiction.

Mental health checks were another critical sub-component that participants commonly agreed upon as necessary for improving firearm legislation. There was agreement among participants that individuals with known mental health conditions should have undergone thorough and comprehensive assessments before being allowed to purchase firearms. In particular, conditions such as severe anxiety, depression, and other mood disorders were often cited as key factors that could have impaired an individual's judgment, impulse control, and ability to responsibly handle a weapon. Participants emphasized that individuals suffering from these conditions, especially if they were not receiving proper treatment or support, could have posed a greater risk to themselves or others if given access to firearms.

Beyond just mental health disorders like anxiety and depression, substance abuse issues were also highlighted as crucial considerations. Many participants pointed to the dangerous combination of drug abuse and firearms, noting that individuals under the influence of substances were significantly more prone to erratic behavior and violent tendencies. Participants

expressed concern that alcohol, in particular, could have severely impaired an individual's decision-making capabilities, increasing the likelihood of impulsive actions, including acts of violence or self-harm.

Participants were particularly vocal about the need for laws that would have helped prevent individuals in crisis from acquiring weapons in the first place. The concept of "red flag" legislation that would have allowed authorities to temporarily confiscate firearms from individuals deemed to be a threat to themselves or others was supported by a majority of the participants. Many of them believed that if mental health professionals or family members had recognized warning signs of a potential crisis, they should have had the ability to intervene with one's ability to own a firearm.

Participants expressed a desire to balance the constitutional right to bear arms with an awareness of the serious risks posed by mental health issues and substance abuse. They supported stronger checks on firearm ownership, particularly for those dealing with mental health challenges, and believed that these measures could have helped mitigate the devastating effects of firearm-related suicides, domestic violence, and other tragic incidents. By advocating for more stringent evaluations and regulations surrounding mental health and firearm access, participants sought to create a safer environment for individuals struggling with mental illness, while also upholding the rights of responsible gun owners. While there was agreement on the right to own firearms, the conversations revealed a nuanced and complex view of gun ownership. Participants were generally open to reforms that would have enhanced safety without infringing on individual rights and ensured the protection of constitutional rights while addressing the need for public safety.

Firearm Knowledge

This theme was one that was not necessarily expected. One of the main arguments made in any firearm debate was the lack of or over-legislation of firearms. From a knowledge standpoint, all participants mentioned that background checks were a requirement for the purchase or possession of a firearm. Although this was generally correct, it was not due to legislation, as private sales of firearms from owner to owner or transfers from one family member to another did not require background checks. The same participants stated that it was a right to own a gun in the United States, but only a few referenced the Second Amendment. A few participants admitted that they really did not know the state or federal legislation regarding firearm ownership. Out of all the participants, only one mentioned a school shooting by name, “Columbine,” and never referenced a recent event.

Political and School Official Capabilities

There was a wide range of opinions regarding school safety, with some individuals advocating for more substantial investments in security measures such as metal detectors and security guards, and calling for mandatory screening of students as they entered school grounds. Many believed that preventing school shootings went beyond physical security and required addressing mental health issues among students. Many believed that identifying and supporting students with underlying emotional or psychological struggles could have helped mitigate the risk of violence. Participants believed that to mitigate school shootings, mental health support and services for adolescents were just as important as mental health background checks and laws for firearm ownership. To improve school safety, there was an emphasis on providing counseling and therapeutic services that could have reduced aggression or feelings of alienation among students.

Some participants believed that schools needed to do more to address bullying, anger management, and other social issues that could contribute to violence. Some believed that fostering a positive school climate and offering students the tools to cope with emotional challenges could have significantly reduced the likelihood of violent incidents. The need for increased availability of mental health services was also seen as a key component in reshaping the culture within schools and addressing the underlying causes of aggression or violent behavior.

Some participants said they felt frustration toward political leaders, with some arguing that they were not doing enough to address the issue of school violence. The perception was that many politicians, who might have been more removed from the challenges faced by public schools, did not prioritize safety measures because their children attended more secure, often more affluent schools. As a result, there was criticism that political leaders lacked a sense of urgency or personal connection to the problems faced by schools.

On the other hand, others said they felt that local school administrators and teachers were doing the best they could with the limited resources available to them. Many educators and school officials worked hard to implement security protocols, such as drills and lockdown procedures, but there was an acknowledgment that these efforts often fell short due to the size and complexity of schools, and the limitations of existing technologies and security systems.

Some individuals proposed measures that tended to be “extreme” to improve school safety, such as allowing teachers to carry firearms with the proper training. Others suggested that resources would have been better allocated to placing trained armed security officers in schools rather than spending money on measures like bulletproof backpacks, which they argued did little

to address the root causes of school violence. There was also concern that current safety measures, such as metal detectors and surveillance cameras, were not enough to fully secure schools, especially given that many schools had multiple points of entry that could not be monitored as effectively as entrances equipped with security systems.

Opinions about the effectiveness of local and state officials' responses to school safety varied greatly. Some individuals said they felt that these officials were taking adequate steps to improve school safety, while others believed more needed to be done. There was a shared understanding that school safety was a complex issue, one that required a multi-faceted approach. Funding, resources, the size of schools, and the diverse needs of students all played a role in shaping the effectiveness of safety measures. Some participants believed more resources should have been devoted to physical security, mental health support, and anti-bullying efforts. All the participants agreed that more comprehensive and proactive action was needed from both local and state officials to ensure that students were safe in their schools.

Willingness to Compromise

As highlighted in the Firearm Possession section, a sub-theme emerged where all participants expressed a strong desire for more comprehensive background checks. These checks would not only have included evaluations for substance abuse and mental health but also encompassed firearm storage legislation. This willingness to explore compromises extended beyond background checks for firearms to a broader discussion on how adolescent mental health was addressed, as many participants viewed it as a critical factor in preventing school shootings.

Concerns were raised about the role student mental health played as a major underlying cause of school shootings, with some participants emphasizing that access to firearms alone was

not the sole issue, particularly since many shootings were carried out by young adolescents. Several participants pointed to the influence of violent media, such as television, movies, and video games like *Call of Duty*, where players engaged in first-person shooting experiences. Others believed that difficult home environments, poor domestic outcomes, and experiences of bullying were contributing factors. Despite the different perspectives, there was consensus that both state and federal funding should have been allocated to policies that addressed these issues, although participants had varying opinions on how the funds should have been spent.

All participants agreed that political affiliation was not a factor in shaping their views on firearm-related topics. Instead, their beliefs and values were primarily influenced by their personal upbringings and life experiences. No one expressed frustration with or blamed any political party, and all participants emphasized that political differences should not have hindered constructive dialogue. There was a shared commitment to respecting differing opinions, with the understanding that everyone's rights should have been honored within reason. Ultimately, there was unanimous agreement that urgent action was needed to prevent future school shootings.

Implications

The first implication the study found was that all participants believed their political affiliation did not influence their views on firearm regulation and school shootings. Instead of being shaped by party ideology, their beliefs about firearm ownership were primarily influenced by their upbringing, personal experiences, and exposure to firearms within their communities. Many participants grew up in households where firearm use was common for activities such as hunting or personal protection, which played a significant role in shaping their perspectives. Despite the common assumption that political party affiliation dictates opinions on gun control, these participants rejected that notion, emphasizing that their values and experiences carried

more weight in forming their views. They expressed a strong belief in the importance of working together on firearm-related issues, acknowledging that meaningful reform could only have been achieved through collaboration rather than political division. Regardless of their personal stance on firearm ownership, they were open to discussions on responsible firearm policies and recognized the importance of balancing individual rights with public safety.

To achieve meaningful firearm reform, political leaders and society as a whole should have strived to address the issue without allowing political bias to dictate the conversation. A key recommendation from the study was to remove firearm regulation from the realm of partisan politics and instead focus on solutions that unite people rather than highlighting their differences. By shifting the conversation away from party platforms, lawmakers could have developed policies that truly served the best interests of students, teachers, and school administrators. A nonpartisan approach would have allowed for more effective discussions on firearm safety, emphasizing practical reforms that prioritized school security and the well-being of the community. Rather than engaging in political debates that often stalled progress, leaders should have concentrated on implementing policies that were fair, balanced, and focused on protecting students. This approach would have helped create legislation that was widely supported, ensuring that firearm reform efforts were driven by the needs of the people rather than by political agendas.

The second implication was based on the proposed theoretical framework that introduced a fourth way to resolve cognitive dissonance. This fourth option involved having the person experiencing dissonance shift their beliefs onto the other individual rather than choosing one of the three original paths. This allowed the person to cope with the discomfort more easily. Although participants in the study experienced cognitive dissonance around issues such as school

shootings and gun ownership, they did not resort to this proposed strategy of shifting their beliefs onto others to achieve the outcomes they desired. Instead, all participants demonstrated a willingness to collaborate on solutions, particularly around improving background checks, closing loopholes, incorporating mental health assessments into the process, expanding mental health access, and regulating firearms. Notably, participants never blamed the opposing side as the source of the problem.

The third implication was that addressing firearm regulation and school safety required a collaborative approach that moved beyond political divisions and focused on practical solutions. Participants in the study emphasized that their political affiliation did not dictate their beliefs on gun control or school shootings. Instead, their views were shaped by their upbringing, personal experiences, and exposure to firearms in their communities. Many recognized the importance of finding common ground and working together on firearm reform that prioritized student and staff safety rather than political agendas. By shifting the conversation away from partisan disputes and focusing on the well-being of schools, meaningful progress could have been made toward effective firearm legislation.

One key recommendation was to invite local, state, and federal politicians to participate in teacher and school focus groups, as well as school shooting drills. By experiencing these drills firsthand and engaging with educators, administrators, and students, policymakers could have better understood the challenges schools faced regarding gun violence. This direct exposure may have encouraged more informed decision-making and fostered policies that truly addressed the needs of schools rather than blanket solutions that may not fit every district. Additionally, the development of a school shooting and gun violence task force including politicians, school leaders, teachers, and local and state law enforcement agencies could have created a structured

platform for discussing and implementing effective safety measures. With federal funding allocated at the state and district levels, schools could have tailored security solutions to their specific needs rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach.

Another consideration was the controversial idea of arming teachers and administrators as a means of improving school security. Proponents argued that having trained staff with firearms could have provided a faster response to active shooter situations, potentially reducing casualties. The presence of armed personnel might also have acted as a deterrent to potential attackers, while increasing staff confidence in handling emergencies. Additionally, this approach could have served as a cost-effective alternative to hiring additional security personnel. However, there were significant challenges to arming educators, including the risks of accidental discharge or misuse of firearms, the psychological toll on teachers and staff, and potential legal liabilities. The presence of weapons in schools could have altered the learning environment, leading to increased anxiety among students and staff. Furthermore, public backlash may have arisen from those who believed that schools should remain gun-free zones. The costs associated with proper training, firearm maintenance, and ongoing support for armed school staff had to have been considered. While arming teachers may have offered potential benefits, it was a complex solution that required careful evaluation to ensure it did not introduce additional risks or unintended consequences.

Ultimately, improving school safety and addressing firearm violence require a balanced, multi-faceted approach. Engaging politicians in school discussions and drills, creating specialized task forces, and carefully evaluating security measures like arming teachers could have contributed to a safer educational environment. By prioritizing collaboration, flexibility, and student well-being, policymakers and educators could have worked together to develop

solutions that effectively protected schools while considering the diverse needs of different communities.

The last implication was how the media played a significant role in shaping public perceptions of school shootings and firearm possession, often through a lens of political bias. There appeared to have been a noticeable disconnect between how the media portrayed these issues and how participants in the study perceived them. As Marty stated during the interview, “Republicans are generally for guns and Democrats are for banning them.” While participants generally took a more cooperative and solution-focused approach, favoring measures such as improved background checks and expanded mental health support, the media often framed the debate in a way that aligned with political ideologies. News outlets with distinct political leanings may have presented gun control and school shootings in ways that reinforced their audience’s pre-existing beliefs, emphasizing either the urgency of stricter regulations or the protection of Second Amendment rights. This type of reporting could have deepened divisions and entrenched polarized views, making it harder for the public and policymakers to engage in constructive discussions.

One theoretical framework suggested that the media often employed a “fourth option,” shifting the narrative to frame one side as the clear solution while portraying the other as the primary problem. This strategy may have served to ease cognitive dissonance among viewers but contrasted with the attitudes expressed by study participants, who were generally open to bipartisan collaboration. Instead of encouraging common ground, the media’s focus on conflict may have distorted public perception of firearm issues and made it more difficult to implement effective reform. By emphasizing controversy over consensus, media coverage could have hindered the development of practical solutions and reduced the likelihood of legislative

progress. A shift toward more balanced and solution-driven reporting could have helped bridge ideological gaps and encouraged meaningful discussions on firearm reform, rather than reinforcing partisan divides.

Limitations of the Study

One of the primary limitations of this study was the small sample size, as only nine participants were included. A larger sample would have provided more robust results and enhanced the generalizability of the findings. Since sample size was a critical component of data collection, the limited number of participants may not have fully captured broader trends or variations in the population. Additionally, the study lacked diversity in its participant pool with eight individuals identifying as Caucasian and only one as Hispanic. A more diverse sample would have offered a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter across different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

During the recruitment process, a limitation arose due to the fact that many of the participants were sourced through one social media channel, LinkedIn, which is a platform primarily used by working professionals. As such, this excluded individuals who may have been part of the workforce but did not utilize LinkedIn. The platform required access to the internet, a smart device or computer, and a certain level of technical literacy, which could have excluded individuals with limited financial resources or those who lacked digital literacy. Additionally, since participant recruitment was conducted exclusively through LinkedIn, only those with an active LinkedIn account would have been notified of the study. This recruitment strategy may have inadvertently excluded potential participants who were more active on other social media platforms, such as Facebook or Instagram, or who do not use social media altogether.

Incorporating offline recruitment methods, such as community bulletin boards, job centers, and

industry events could help reach individuals who may not have access to or familiarity with digital platforms. Collaborating with local organizations, professional associations, and workforce development programs could also increase participation from individuals who may have been excluded due to financial or technological barriers. By diversifying recruitment channels, researchers can enhance the inclusivity and representativeness of their study samples.

Furthermore, the geographic scope of the study was limited to the eastern and central parts of Pennsylvania. As a result, the recruitment method led to a concentration of participants primarily residing along the I-81 and I-476 corridors in eastern Pennsylvania. This geographical focus may have excluded individuals living outside of eastern Pennsylvania or those employed in industries unrelated to distribution, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives in the study. Expanding the study area to include the western part of the state would have allowed for a more representative sample of Pennsylvania's population and potentially uncovered regional differences.

The study's focus on parents of students in Pennsylvania presented another limitation. While each state had its own firearms legislation, federal laws applied across the country, and school shootings occurred in multiple states, not just Pennsylvania. This narrow focus on Pennsylvania excluded individuals from other states who may have had different perspectives on the issue, influenced by their own state-specific laws. Conducting a study with a larger sample size inclusive of other states would allow for further analysis to be conducted on possible regional differences of the emergent themes within this study.

Another limitation of the study was the grade level of the participants' children. Individuals who had children attending K-12 or higher education institutions were able to

participate in this study. However, it was uncovered through interviews that all the participants had children that were attending elementary or middle school. Thus, no participants had children who were attending high school or college during the time of this study. Obtaining more participants who have older children attending high school and/or college could lend to different perspectives on emergent themes in this study, especially gun laws and school shootings.

The interview style used in this study was also a limitation. Interviews were conducted virtually in a one-on-one setting with no video. Although having interviews virtually provided flexibility in scheduling for the participants, having in-person interviews could have allowed for the development of a more personal approach. No video was used intentionally to avoid any leading of responses through facial expressions or non-verbal cues. Also, since interviews were one-on-one, participants were able to answer questions freely without the fear of being judged by others. Existing research shows a correlation between political affiliation on views of gun laws (Oraka et al., 2019). However, this study found that participants stated political affiliation had no influence on their views about firearm regulation. Collecting data through a different interview style, such as a focus group, may have yielded different responses surrounding certain themes, such as political affiliation and its influence on gun laws, as participants may be more prone to aligning with other participants' views or a larger group consensus.

Additionally, limiting the study to parents of current students excluded those whose children had already graduated or left school, potentially overlooking valuable insights from a broader range of parental experiences. Considering parents whose children have already graduated or left the school may offer unique perspectives based on long-term observations and experiences, such as how their views have evolved over time or how past school safety incidents

influenced their concerns. Their insights could contribute to a more holistic understanding of parental attitudes toward school safety and firearm policies.

Expanding both the geographic scope and participant criteria would enhance the study's generalizability and provide a more nuanced perspective on how parents across different states and life stages perceive the issue.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several areas of future research could add to the body of research on this subject. This topic had been heavily looked at through a quantitative lens, therefore more qualitative studies could be conducted on state and federal levels. There was a tendency for firearms topics to be applied to political parties from a quantitative standpoint, but there appears to be more common ground for change or reform when people's thoughts and convictions were applied. Using a different qualitative approach, such as focus groups, could lend itself to new perspectives on the emergent themes from this study.

School shootings are very complex tragic events where the different components became aggregated into studies. Future research could compartmentalize these into smaller and more precise studies. Research topics could look solely at the pieces to get a better understanding of parents' perspectives, such as children and mental health, children and media violence, and firearm legislation.

Additionally, future studies should consider including parents whose children have already graduated or left the school system. These individuals may offer unique perspectives based on long-term observations and experiences, such as how their views have evolved over time or how past school safety incidents influenced their concerns. Their insights could

contribute to a more holistic understanding of parental attitudes toward school safety and firearm policies.

Future research should further examine the influence of media narratives on public opinion, particularly in comparison to how the government uses media to frame issues related to school shootings and firearm regulations. Understanding the differences between the way media outlets presented these topics, and the actual attitudes of the public could provide valuable insights into the role of political messaging and its impact on policy discussions. Additionally, studying how government officials use media to promote specific firearm policies (e.g., press conferences, social media, legislative messaging, etc.) could reveal patterns in how public sentiment is shaped or manipulated. By analyzing these dynamics, researchers could identify ways to encourage more accurate and solution-focused media coverage that aligns with the diverse perspectives of the people affected by these issues. This knowledge could lead to the development of strategies that promote responsible journalism and policy-making that truly reflect public concerns rather than politically driven narratives.

Future research should prioritize a larger sample size to improve reliability and generalizability. Recruiting a more diverse participant pool would ensure that findings are reflective of a broader population. Additionally, expanding the study's geographic range to include western Pennsylvania and other regions of the state or nation would provide a more comprehensive perspective on the topic.

Additionally, future research could be conducted on this topic looking through the lens of different participants, such as current students in K-12 or higher education, school leaders, and elected political officials. The results and views from these various groups could lend itself

useful to larger discussions on the themes identified in this study, as well as contribute to overall policy development at local, state, and national levels.

To address the limitations associated with participant recruitment, future research should consider utilizing multiple recruitment methods beyond LinkedIn to reach a broader and more diverse population. Expanding recruitment efforts to additional social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, could help engage individuals who may not actively use LinkedIn. These platforms have different user demographics and could provide access to participants from a wider range of industries, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographic locations.

Lastly, future research could be conducted to see if state and federal bureaucrats were representing the public in their values to reduce school shootings. Published data from political polls on firearms could be compared to existing qualitative data to examine what disconnects exist, if any, between politicians and the communities they serve.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to provide qualitative insight into the perspectives of parents regarding firearm legislation, particularly in relation to school shootings, as most existing research on this topic had been quantitative. This study aimed to fill the gap by offering a more in-depth understanding of the beliefs, opinions, and concerns of participants around the topics of gun control, school safety, and mental health.

The study revealed several key themes related to firearm possession and safety. Many participants believed that owning firearms was a constitutional right with deep cultural and historical roots in American society. However, opinions on the regulation of specific types of

firearms, like semi-automatic rifles, varied. While there was a strong consensus in favor of gun ownership, some participants called for stricter regulations on certain weapons and emphasized the need for safe storage laws to reduce the risk of accidents or unauthorized access, especially in homes with children or individuals with unstable mental health. Additionally, participants universally agreed on the need for more stringent background checks, including mental health and substance abuse screenings, as well as laws to prevent individuals in crisis from acquiring firearms.

The study also identified the influence of media portrayals on public opinion about firearm legislation. Participants often expressed more cooperative and solution-focused approaches, advocating for better background checks and mental health support. This was not what the proposed theoretical framework predicted. The study suggested that the media tended to shift responsibility onto one side of the debate, creating divisions between political groups.

The study's limitations included a sample that was geographically concentrated in eastern Pennsylvania and a recruitment method that excluded those not using LinkedIn or who were not active on social media. Additionally, focusing only on parents with children currently in school may have limited the diversity of perspectives. Future research could have expanded on these findings by exploring broader perspectives, including those of individuals from different states and political affiliations, and by examining the public's views on school safety and firearm legislation in greater depth.

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Letter

Subject Line: Seeking Pennsylvania Parents' Perspectives on Gun Violence

Dear Parents:

My name is Francis Dombrowski, and I am a doctoral student at Marywood University. I am conducting a research study. The purpose is to examine the barriers preventing new legislative gun reform in the state of Pennsylvania from the perspective of parents on school shootings.

You are invited to participate if you qualify. To qualify for this study, you must meet **all** the following criteria:

- Age 18 years or older.
- Reside in the state of Pennsylvania.

And meet **one** of the following criteria:

- Has a dependent child or children that are currently attending a K12 public or private school*
- Has a dependent child or children that are currently attending a public or private college or university*

* For the purpose of this study, a dependent child is considered to be under the age of 19 or under the age of 24 if a full-time student, or any age if permanently and totally disabled.

If you are a parent that meets the requirements listed above, then you are invited to participate. If you are selected based on demographic information, the study will be conducted via phone or electronic call (options include Microsoft Teams or Zoom) based on your preference. The interview will take approximately one hour. This study is being conducted for an educational purpose and will help educators, legislators, and the public to better understand each other's perspectives for gun reform.

Benefits of this study may include a better understanding of the needs of the communities to create gun reform legislation to keep its children safe.

For your participation, following the completion of the interview, you will receive a \$10 electronic gift card as a small token for your time and assistance. If you are interested in being interviewed for this study, respond as soon as possible as participant space is limited. **If you are eligible and willing to participate in this study, please click here.** Upon indicating your interest, you will be provided with an informed consent form, which you must read and agree to. You will then be directed to enter your demographic information. Within five business days of submission, the researcher will contact you by your preferred method of communication to set up an interview.

Survey Link: [Only if the study takes place online via a survey site, enter the URL to the survey here - otherwise, remove this section; ideally, the informed consent form should appear as the first page reached by the participants after clicking the link.]

This study has been approved by Marywood University's Exempt Review Committee. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone or via email at the contact information below. I look forward to working with you!

Sincerely,

Francis Dombrowski

570.266.3959

fjdombrowski@m.marywood.edu

Appendix B: ERC Informed Consent Form

Title: *A Qualitative Study of Barriers Preventing New Legislative Gun Reform in the State of Pennsylvania from the Perspective of Parents on School Shootings*

Principal Investigator (PI): Francis Dombrowski

Principal Investigator Contact Information: fjdombrowski@m.marywood.edu

Research Advisor: Dr. Stan Kania

Research Advisor Contact Information: stankania@maryu.marywood.edu

Provider of Study Funding: Francis Dombrowski

Invitation for a Research Study

You are invited to take part in a research study about the barriers preventing new legislative gun reform in the state of Pennsylvania from the perspective of parents on school shootings. To participate, you meet the following criteria: of the age of 18 years or older and reside in the state of Pennsylvania and have a dependent child or children that are currently attending a K12 public or private school or have a dependent child or children that are currently attending a public or private college or university.*

* For the purpose of this study, a dependent child is considered to be under the age of 19 or under the age of 24 if a full-time student, or any age if permanently and totally disabled.

Purpose – About the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine what are the barriers preventing new legislative gun reform in the state of Pennsylvania from the perspective of parents on school shootings. Through a deeper understanding of the experiences that shape parents' views on gun reform, it is hoped to find common ground to create a platform for discussion on what new gun legislation can be accomplished.

Procedures - What You Will Do

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire to indicate demographic information about yourself. This is a one-time data collection and will take no more than five minutes of your time. Upon completing the brief demographic questionnaire, the researcher will set up a time to speak with you about your experiences and thoughts about barriers preventing new legislative gun reform in the state of Pennsylvania. The interview will last approximately one hour and will be audio recorded so that the investigator can transcribe the interview. You can ask follow-up questions via email after the interview has been conducted as well as during the interview. There is also the possibility that the researcher may request a follow-up interview to clarify responses if needed.

Risks and Benefits

The risk of participating in the study is no greater than the risks experienced in daily life or normal activities. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, you may terminate the interview at any time without reason. The investigator is unable to provide you with any legal or medical advice. However, if you or someone you know are facing physical or psychological harm or may harm someone, the investigator may provide you with a contact that can assist you. There is also a “Contacts” section at the end of this informed consent document.

The benefits of participating in this study include the opportunity to provide educators, legislators, and the public information to create a better understanding of each citizen’s needs for gun reform and to help communities create gun reform legislation to keep its children safe.

Payment or Other Rewards

You will receive a \$10.00 electronic gift card for your participation in this research study and if you are selected to be interviewed. If you are not selected to participate as an interviewee in this study based on your demographic information matching too closely with other participants, then the researcher will notify you by email.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. Information used in any written or presented report will not make it possible to identify you. Only the main investigator and the three faculty members on this project’s doctoral committee will have access to the research records. Records will be electronically stored and encrypted for three years, and the data will then be destroyed through permanent deletion of the files.

Taking Part is Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the investigator. It will not affect your relationship with Marywood University. You may withdraw at any time without reason with no type of penalty. To withdraw from the study, please contact the investigator by using the contact information listed above. Recorded information pertaining to you during this study will be permanently destroyed.

Contacts and Questions

If you have questions about this study at any time, contact the principal investigator. His contact information appears at the top of the first page.

If you have questions related to the rights of research participants or research-related injuries (where applicable), please contact the Institutional Review Board at (570) 961-4782 or irbhelp@marywood.edu.

You may save or print a copy of this form for your records.

Contacts

You may save or print a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent

By proceeding:

- You understand what the study involves.
- You have asked questions if you had them.
- You agree to participate in the study.

Appendix C: Demographic Information Collection

Thank you for completing the demographic information form to participate in the research study on the barriers preventing new legislative gun reform in the state of Pennsylvania from the perspective of the parents on school shootings.

To participate, you meet the following criteria: of the age of 18 years or older and reside in the state of Pennsylvania and have a dependent child or children that are currently attending a K12 public or private school or have a dependent child or children that are currently attending a public or private college or university.*

* For the purpose of this study, a dependent child is considered to be under the age of 19 or under the age of 24 if a full-time student, or any age if permanently and totally disabled.

This study is completely confidential, and your participation is voluntary. If you are selected for an interview, you will receive a \$10.00 electronic gift card as a small token for your time and assistance.

If any questions arise, please contact the researcher, Frank Dombrowski, a doctoral student at Marywood University, at fjdombrowski@m.marywood.edu.

Demographic Information

Which of the following characteristics apply to you?

Check all that apply to indicate the trait(s):

- Age 18 years or older.
- Reside in the state of Pennsylvania.
- Have a child or children attending a public or private K12 school.
- Have a child or children attending a public or private college or university.

What is your birth year?

With what gender do you identify?

What is your political affiliation?

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- No affiliation
- Other

What is your race/ethnicity?

Check all that apply.

- White
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Hispanic or Latino
- Asian American
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Two or more.
- Other_____.
- Prefer not to answer.

Interview Information

Please provide your contact information and preference for mode of communication. The researcher, Frank Dombrowski, will contact you within five business days.

- Microsoft Teams meeting.
- Zoom meeting.
- Other: _____.

What time of day would you prefer to complete the interview?

Choose all that apply.

- Weekday morning
- Weekday afternoon
- Weekday evening
- Weekend morning
- Weekend afternoon
- Weekend evening
- Other

Please choose a pseudonym that will be used throughout the interview and during analysis and reporting. A pseudonym is a fake name or alias to be used instead of your real name in order to preserve your participant confidentiality.

Provide an email address that the researcher may use to confirm the interview with you. Your indicated email address will be stripped from your responses upon receipt of this form and will only be used to send an incentive for taking part in the study.

Thank you.

Please contact Frank Dombrowski, a Marywood University doctoral student, at fjdombrowski@m.marywood.edu with any questions or comments about the study.

Appendix D: Participant Interview Confirmation

Dear [Participant],

Thank you for completing the demographic information form to participate in the research study on the barriers preventing new legislative gun reform in the state of Pennsylvania from the perspective of the parents on school shootings. Based on the information that you provided, it seems that a [weekday/weekend/morning/afternoon/evening] would be the best time to coordinate the interview, which will be approximately one hour.

Would [proposed date] through [preferred method of communication] work well for you? Please let me know and I will send you a [link] for the meeting.

I look forward to speaking with you.

Best regards,

Frank Dombrowski

fjdombrowski@m.marywood.edu

(570) 266-3959

Appendix E: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

- What are your thoughts on firearms in the United States?
- What are your thoughts on current laws on firearms in the United States?
- What are your thoughts on school shootings in the United States?
- What is your perspective of why others want to ban or keep their firearms?
- What were your experiences with firearms as an adolescent?
- What laws do you think the United States has regarding firearms?
- What laws do you think the state of Pennsylvania has regarding firearms?
- Why do you think it's necessary to keep firearms?
- Why do you think it's necessary to ban and/or limit firearms?
- How have your views on firearms changed or not changed throughout your life?
- What is your political affiliation?
- How does your political affiliation shape your views on firearms?
- What biases, if any, do you have about guns and gun ownership?
- Based on your current political views, what would it take for you to change your current stance/views on gun reform in the United States?
- What type of legislation on firearms do you think should stay? Why?
- What type of legislation on firearms do you think should be changed? Why?
- Do you feel school officials are doing enough to prevent school shootings? Why?
- Do you feel that public officials are doing enough to prevent school shootings? Why?
- What do you think is the biggest obstacle to preventing school shootings? Why?
- Do you feel comfortable sending your children to school? Why?
- What additional comments do you have about school shootings and prevention?

Appendix F: Social Media Post

Parents: What are your thoughts on gun legislation and school shootings?

Dear Parents,

My name is Frank Dombrowski, and I am a doctoral student in the Strategic Leadership and Administration program at Marywood University. I am seeking participants for my research study. The purpose of this study is to find the barriers preventing new legislative gun reform in Pennsylvania from the perspective of parents to mitigate school shootings.

If you would like to participate or find out more about this study, please follow this link.

<https://forms.gle/WSBDe3fhhHbSwATQ9>

Appendix G: Marywood University Exempt Review Committee (ERC) Approval Letter



**MARYWOOD UNIVERSITY
EXEMPT REVIEW COMMITTEE
Immaculata Hall, 2300 Adams Avenue, Scranton, PA 18509**

DATE: October 7, 2024
 TO: Francis Dombrowski, PHD
 FROM: Marywood University Exempt Review Committee
 STUDY TITLE: [2248261-2] *Pennsylvania Parents' Perspectives: Barriers Preventing New Legislative Gun Reform to Mitigate School Shootings*
 MU ERC #:
 SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification
 ACTION: APPROVED
 APPROVAL DATE: October 7, 2024
CHECK IN DUE DATE: October 7, 2025
 REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
 EXEMPT CATEGORY: 45 CFR 46.104 (d)(1)

Dear Mr. Dombrowski:

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials to your Exemption Request for this research study. Marywood University's ERC has **APPROVED** your submission. The project meets federal exemption criteria and involves minimal risk to subjects participating in the research. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a complete description of the study and assurance of subject understanding.

We have applied the ERC's approval stamp to the following documents, which have been uploaded with this letter in IRBNet. The stamp must appear on versions shared with subjects wherever possible. If it is not feasible to use the stamped versions online (e.g. some email

systems or survey platforms), please ensure that the language in the transmitted versions is identical to the stamped versions.

1. Informed Consent Form
2. Advertisement

Please also note that:

- **CLOSURE REPORTING:** Upon completion of the research, you must file a closure report form via IRBNet.
- **CHECK IN REPORTING:** While there is no expiration date for exempted studies, the ERC maintains oversight of open projects. If activities will continue beyond your approval's one-year anniversary of **10/07/25**, file a check in form by that date.
- **RECORDS RETENTION:** While there is no minimum retention period for exempted studies, you must retain records for the length of time stated in your application and informed consent form.
- **DEVIATION, UNANTICIPATED PROBLEM OR SERIOUS ADVERSE EVENT REPORTING:** If any of these events occur, you must file the appropriate form immediately via IRBNet.
- **REVISION REQUESTS:** If you decide to make procedural or document changes to your approved project, you must file a revision request form for review and approval prior to implementation, except when necessary to eliminate apparent, immediate hazards to the subjects. In hazardous situations, you must file the form immediately afterward.

Forms for the reports mentioned above may be found on the [ERC's website](#) or in IRBNet's Forms library. The library appears after you begin a follow-up package within your existing project and then click the Designer button on the left menu, followed by the blue "Need forms" link on the main screen (opens library under Step 1).

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Office at 570-348-6211, x.2418 or irbhelp@marywood.edu. Please include your study title and IRBNet number in all correspondence with this office.

Thank you and good luck with your research!

Regards,
Exempt Review Committee

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