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BASIC FACTS

AMERICA'S MISSING POPULAR MOVEMENT FOR GUN CONTROL

by Kristin A. Goss, Sanford School, Duke University

Americans die by gun violence at rates unheard of in other advanced countries. Day by day, men, women, and children perish in gun battles, firearm accidents, and shootings during otherwise banal disputes among friends or family members. Worse, murderous rampages happen every few months – wrought by angry gunmen who suddenly open fire in seemingly safe places. More than sixty rampages have wrecked havoc since 1982 – including thirteen in 2012 alone. Who can blot out the terrible images of moviegoers attacked in Colorado, worshipers murdered in Wisconsin, and – most incomprehensible – tiny schoolchildren mowed down in Newtown, Connecticut?

With each senseless rampage, America's collective shock sparks calls for a "national conversation" about stricter gun laws. But the talk soon fizzles and policy changes do not occur. Why? With so much gun violence and recurrent spikes of public concern, why is there no broad movement to insist on action? The U.S. pro-gun lobby is strong and savvy, but my research also underlines the factors that have undercut the potential for a broad U.S. gun control movement.

The Political Clout of Pro-Gun Forces

America has a fiercely determined set of forces pushing against any regulation of firearms. Beyond gun manufacturers and dealers, the anchor is the National Rifle Association, which is organized in localities and states as well as nationally. This group started 141 years ago as a network for hunters; in the 1970s, it perfected the art of mobilizing its three to four million members to fight against any regulation of even high-power automated firearms. Members show up at town hall meetings, write to newspapers, and contact their representatives. Gun owners have become a critical constituency in the Republican Party and a constant worry to anxious Democrats gripped by the belief that Al Gore's support for gun control cost him the presidency. Although its candidates do not always win at the polls, the National Rife Association enjoys an aura of political invincibility. And its lobbying efforts have been greatly reinforced by recent federal court rulings – including the U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2008 that invoked the Second Amendment affirming an individual right for Americans to own firearms.

The Limits of Movement-Building for Gun Control

Beyond the clout and political savvy of pro-gun forces, resource and strategic shortfalls have also weakened pro-regulatory forces and limited their capacity to take advantage of moments of crisis and heightened public concern.

- **Small, thin memberships.** While the National Rifle Association and its allies attract millions of dues-paying members with glossy magazines, facilities for sportsmen, and opportunities to socialize, gun control proponents offer no such side-benefits. They rely on highly committed, public-spirited leaders with followers in the tens of thousands.

- **Restricted funding.** Philanthropic foundations fund the environmental movement, for example, but are wary of supporting gun control – and their grants cannot be used for certain forms of legislative lobbying or support for electoral candidates. Government resources are available to some public-interest movements, but not to gun control groups.

- **Missing women's organizations.** The changing priorities of women's organizations help to account for America's missing gun control movement. For much of the 20th century, women's associations with millions of members pushed for social reforms and policy changes on behalf of broad public constituencies and causes that otherwise had trouble gaining a hearing. When Congress first considered gun control in the 1930s, for example, the two-million-member General Federation of Women's Clubs spoke for everyday citizens fed up with gangland violence. But large women's federations with a presence in every state and community have gone into decline in recent decades, replaced by smaller, professionally run advocacy organizations offering specialized expertise on behalf of women's rights.

- **Weaknesses of strategy and narrative.** Modern U.S. gun control advocates decided early on not to invest in grassroots movement building at the state or national levels. Instead, they started out by lobbying for handgun bans – which backfired, because thinly resourced advocacy provoked gun owners and made it easy for the National Rifle Association to move toward no-compromise positions. As "gun control" was demonized, advocates flailed about looking for a compelling narrative, at times talking about "bad guns" (such as assault weapons) and at other times about "gun safety," "gun violence prevention" and a "public health epidemic."

Will Breakthroughs Come from Drives to Protect Children?

After a spate of school shootings, women's networks formed to demand stricter gun laws – and on Mother's Day 2000, women arrived en masse in Washington, DC, for a "Million Mom March" synchronized with additional protests in scores of cities. Local March groups became chapters in the nation's biggest gun control organization, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. Protecting children from gun violence seems to be the most effective framework for mobilizing everyday Americans. In a study of nearly 50 gun control groups established in the 1990s, I found that 60% were created in direct response to a shooting involving one or more youths. And my research on the March found that participants motivated by children's safety were more likely than others to remain involved in activism for months after the big events.

Today's gun control supporters face rough sledding with politicians who have come to view gun control as a career-ender. But the horrendous events of December 2012 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown may spark new mobilizations in the name of protecting children. Bits and pieces of "conversation" will not do the trick, however. To change firearms politics, the nation's fragile gun violence prevention organizations will need to organize and steadily arouse core constituencies such as women, faith leaders, and law enforcement officers. And they must raise new resources, including from progressives who have been focused on electoral politics. Unless sustained movement-building can be accomplished, one massacre after another will not be enough to shift public debates and prompt real changes in policies about guns in America.

Draws on research in Kristin A. Goss, *Disarmed: The Missing Movement for Gun Control in America* (Princeton University Press, 2006), along with data on gun rampages recently compiled by *Mother Jones* magazine.