Gun violence in America: public health, politics, and pragmatism

Class Schedule: Mondays 11:00am-1:30pm
Class Location: 45 W 4th Street, Room B06
Semester and Year: Fall 2021

Professor: Ted Alcorn
Phone: 917-238-2091
Email: ted.alcorn@gmail.com

COURSE DESCRIPTION:
More U.S. residents have been killed with guns since 1968 than died in all the wars since the country’s founding. Addressing this crisis means solving tenacious public health problems in the realms of science and of politics. In this course we will review the epidemiology of gun violence and the empirical foundations of efforts to address it through policy, policing, behavioral interventions, and environmental/physical design. We will consider obstacles to the rigorous study of gun violence as well as the innovative approaches researchers have adopted to overcome them, whether in the fields of public health, medicine, criminology, or economics. And we will place all of this in the political and legal context that shapes our collective actions. Through lectures and discussion, students will become familiar with the main factors connected with firearm injury, the study of gun violence, the policy actors that have influenced the U.S. response to date, and the underlying beliefs and behaviors that define the U.S. relationship with guns.

COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND RELATED COMPONENTS:

1. Describe the characteristics of major categories of gun violence in the U.S. including domestic violence, community gun violence, suicide, and shootings by law enforcement.
2. Describe how illegal gun markets and social norms influence unlawful gun carrying, and the implications for highly disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.
3. Describe the connections between gun culture (beliefs, behaviors), interest groups’ goals and tactics for building power, and the epidemiology of firearm injuries.
4. Describe successful campaigns to enact gun violence prevention laws or implement non-legislative gun violence prevention programs, highlighting the roles of key stakeholders.
5. Compare the strength of evidence supporting various interventions for addressing gun violence, identify weaknesses in research methods, and highlight gaps in current knowledge.
6. Describe the components of leading non-legislative approaches for reducing community gun violence and the role different stakeholders play in successful implementation.
PRE-REQUISITES:
None

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS:
Late assignments will be penalized 10% per day late.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage or Points:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading responses and classroom participation:</strong> By noon <em>the day before class</em>, students must prepare a brief, informal response to that week’s readings, which will be posted to Brightspace to prepare for group discussion. These responses can be as little as 150 words and <em>no more than 400 words</em> and can adopt any format: drawing connections between readings, critiquing them, or articulating questions. They will not be graded on content or prose, but may be referenced during class discussion. In class, students are expected to listen actively and offer their viewpoints. Inactive presence in class will result in a reduction from the overall grade, whereas students who prepare reading responses and make active contributions in class showing mastery of concepts and methods will receive full points for participation. A detailed rubric detailing the expectations around course engagement will be distributed during the first class-session. If you have concerns about classroom participation, please see the instructor in person early in the semester. <strong>30%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group data exercise:</strong> Working in groups of 3-4, students will obtain and analyze epidemiological data related to gun violence morbidity and mortality from CDC’s Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) or Wide-ranging Online Data for Epidemiologic Research (WONDER), which are portals to national data on gun-related fatalities. Students will receive a problem-set by the 4th week of class, and will then identify, acquire, and analyze data appropriate for answering the questions, producing analyses and visualizations of their findings. The finished product should be a brief written document with an explanation of the analyses pursued, documentation of the analyses themselves, and results yielded (with figures visualized). The final product is due by the 7th week of class. Assignments will be graded on thoughtfulness of analysis, accurate interpretation of data, organization and clarity of writing and visualizations, and attention to detail (including accurate spelling and grammar). <strong>15%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In-class midterm exam:</strong> Students will receive an in-class exam with a set of brief essay questions based on the content of the first half of the course. Further instructions and criteria for grading will be distributed with the exam. <strong>15%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final paper:</strong> Students will write a 2,000- to 3,000-word paper on an evidence-based means of preventing gun violence that we have not covered in-depth in class, describing how the intervention is meant to work, the scope of where and when it has been implemented, the evidence of its effectiveness (referencing at least three peer-reviewed evaluations), and their own critical analysis of the <em>politics</em> of the intervention (who does it appeal to? who objects to it?) Topics could include transformative mentoring and conditional cash transfers such as those incorporated in Advanced Peace, place-based interventions such as improving outdoor lighting, gun buybacks, California’s proactive removal of firearms from prohibited people, new prohibitions on gun ownership such as for alcohol-related offenses, training police officers in de-escalation, introducing new forms of emergency response, improving clearance rates for homicides, or educational programs that promote safe storage of firearms. The paper should cite sources (citations will not count towards word-count). Students must submit a &lt;100-word statement of topic by the 9th week of class and the final paper by the 14th week of class. Assignments will be graded on clarity of writing, accurate and thoughtful employment of supporting evidence, relevance to content covered during the course, and quality of argument. Students will briefly present their findings to their classmates on the final day of class. <strong>40%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All written work should be double-spaced, one-inch margins, and 11-point font.

**GRADING SCALE:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>93-100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>90-92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>87-89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>83-86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>80-82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>77-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>73-76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>70-72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>&lt;69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NYU BRIGHTSPACE:**

Readings will be available on NYU Brightspace, which will be used extensively throughout the semester for assignments, announcements, and communication.

**TECHNOLOGY POLICY:**

A body of evidence demonstrates that use of mobile devices and laptops inhibits learning, both of students employing them and their fellow classmates. Technology policy will be discussed in the first session — but the goal of the class is engagement and participation, not note-taking.

**COURSE OUTLINE:**

The course is organized in three sections. First it introduces the science of gun violence, challenges that policymakers will face in assessing it empirically, and the intersection of behaviors that heighten risk of injury but also codify cultural identities. Second, because “gun violence” is not one but a group of related problems all involving guns, the course reviews the epidemiology of major causes of firearm-related injury and research methods that have been applied to the study of each. Third, the course reviews strategies for addressing gun violence including the evidence supporting them and major outstanding questions for policymakers to tackle. Content will be presented in a combination of lectures and small-group and class-wide discussions.

### Session 1 – The science of gun violence: Asking better questions

**9/20/21**

Reducing gun violence in the U.S. depends on developing new evidence and provoking new actions, and public health practitioners must learn how to ask better questions to advance both.

**Learning Objectives:**

1. Describe firearm injury in the U.S.
2. Introduce fundamental public health concepts such as prevalence, rates, and risk.
3. Consider the role that scientific evidence and reasoning play in the development of policy.

**Required readings:**


Optional readings:
Everytown for Gun Safety. “Firearm Technology and Vocabulary.” Available at: https://everytw/2H8HSy8

Film: Kim Snyder, Newtown, 2016. [Available for rental on Amazon/iTunes/Netflix; a screener can be provided on request.]


---

Session 2 – The science of gun violence: measuring “gun culture” with surveys and ethnographic research

9/27/21  Gun violence and gun politics in the U.S. are preceded by a prevalent and durable culture of gun ownership and use.

Learning Objectives:
1. Describe patterns in firearm ownership, behaviors, and beliefs across demography and geography and over time, highlighting measurement error and gaps in research.
2. Examine how gun behaviors/possession influence cultural identity and political beliefs.
3. Consider the ways in which surveys and qualitative research inform firearm-related research.

Assignments: Interview a gun-owner

Required readings:
Jennifer Carlson, Citizen Protectors (2015) [Chapter 3, p. 58-84].


Optional readings:

Pew Research Center. June 2017. “America’s Complex Relationship with Guns.” Available at: https://pewrsr.ch/2xfG4h7


Session 3 – Violence in focus: mass shootings

10/4/21 Mass shootings account for just 1-2% of total gun homicides but play a disproportionate role in the public’s understanding of gun violence and the policy responses to it.

Learning Objectives:
1. Compare different definitions of ‘mass shooting’ societal responses to them (panic buying, contagion), and consider the meaning these events have for policymakers.
2. Introduce core concepts of epidemiology including standards of evidence, correlation, and causality.
3. Acquire CDC data on violent deaths and walk through a basic analysis together.

In-class activity: introduction to WISQARS

Required readings:


Optional readings:


**Session 4 – Violence in focus: Gun violence in cities - risk, gangs, and illegal gun supply**

10/12/21  Cities bear a disproportionate burden of gun violence — together the 25 largest cities in the U.S. account for one in five of the nation's gun homicides.

**Learning Objectives:**

1. Describe the etiology of gun violence in cities, and what is currently understood about the function of urban gun markets.
2. Demonstrate the contribution of network analysis to gun violence-related research.
3. Discuss models of decision-making related to illegal firearm carrying, and theories of deterrence.

**Group problem-set distributed.**

**Required readings:**


**Optional readings:**


### Session 5 – Violence in focus: domestic violence with guns

10/18/21  More than half of women murdered in the United States are killed by intimate partners or family members — and more than half of intimate partner homicides of women are committed with guns.

**Learning Objectives:**

1. Examine the epidemiology of firearm violence by intimate partners or family members and the interplay with mass shootings and murder-suicides  
2. Discuss how case-control study designs inform the study of risk factors for relatively rare outcomes like domestic violence gun homicide  
3. Introduce state and federal legal framework for restricting access to guns by high-risk groups.

**Required readings:**


Everytown for Gun Safety. 2015. “Domestic Abuse Protective Orders and Firearm Access in Rhode Island.” Available at: [https://every.tw/2y8cKz1](https://every.tw/2y8cKz1)

**Optional readings:**


Session 6 – Violence in focus: gun suicide and unintentional injury

10/25/21

The majority of gun deaths in the US are not homicides but suicides, and many of them are committed by legal possessors, raising unique considerations about how to reduce them — as with rarer but equally tragic unintentional gun injuries.

Learning Objectives:

1. Explain the epidemiology of gun suicide deaths and the role lethal means play in suicide fatality.
2. Weigh the evidence around legislative and non-legislative measures for addressing them (including point of sale interventions, safe storage requirements, gun violence restraining orders, and lethal means counseling).
3. Describe the epidemiology of unintentional firearm injuries.

Required readings:


Optional readings:


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session 7 – Violence in focus: Public carry, justifiable homicides, and Stand Your Ground laws</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>11/1/21</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Learning Objectives:**

1. Review research on defensive gun use and assess its limitations
2. Examine the rhetorical role this research has played in gun politics, the expansion of ‘Stand Your Ground’ laws, and their impact on justifiable homicides by civilians

**Required readings:**


**Assignments: Group data exercise due**

**Optional readings:**


Film: Abigail Disney, Kathleen Hughes, The Armor of Light, 2015. [Available for rental on Amazon/iTunes/Netflix; a screener can be provided on request.]


### Session 8 – In-Class Midterm

### Session 9 – Evidence into action: how public health science shapes and is shaped by gun politics
11/15/21 Science is never apolitical, and even evidence-based policymaking must be undertaken with an understanding of the political dimensions of the field.

**Learning Objectives:**

1. Identify major “gun rights” and gun violence prevention groups and how they shape understanding of the issue by the public and policymakers.
2. Examine how interest groups have influenced how gun violence research is conducted and history and jurisprudence are interpreted.

**Required readings:**


**Optional readings:**

Session 10 – Evidence into action: laws to keep guns out of dangerous hands

11/22/21 Legislative change is prominent among efforts to address gun violence. This session will consider its possibilities and limitations.

Learning Objectives:

1. Summarize the present risk-factor-based paradigm of U.S. gun laws.
2. Assess the existing criminal background check system and its shortcomings (abusive boyfriends, unlicensed sales).
3. Explain how time-series study designs and cohort studies have been employed to evaluate significant legislative interventions.

Required readings:


Rose G (Department of Epidemiology, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Keppel Street, London WC1E 7HT, UK). Sick individuals and sick populations. International Journal of Epidemiology 1985;14: 32–38.


Assignments: Submit topic for final paper

Optional readings:


Session 11 – Police and policed: law enforcement approaches to gun crime

11/29/21 In the U.S., the preeminent (and best-funded) response to gun violence is policing, and law enforcement often view addressing gun violence as their top priority. In this session we will examine the evidence of the positive impact police can have on violence, and the harms their reaction to it can cause.

Learning Objectives:
1. Examine the role that law enforcement play in solving gun crimes, preventing violence through proactive techniques, and gun-focused investigations and interventions.
2. Describe the epidemiology of law-enforcement involved shootings
3. Review the harms that the criminal justice system can cause, and the relationship between police-community trust and violence prevention.

Required readings:
Jill Leovy, Ghettoside: A True Story of a Murder in America, 2015. [Part 1, p. 3-96].


Optional readings:


Session 12 – Evidence into action: Behavioral interventions and gun violence in cities

12/6/21  Among the most evidence-based interventions for reducing gun violence are those seeking to directly reshape the norms of those at highest-risk of victimization and perpetration.

Learning Objectives:
1. Compare interventions to reduce urban gun violence through shifts in social norms—including focused deterrence, violence interruption, and cognitive-behavioral therapy—highlighting challenges to implementing and replicating them.
2. Explain how quasi-experimental and natural experiments are used in gun violence research.

Required readings:

Optional readings:
Rose G (Department of Epidemiology, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Keppel Street, London WC1E 7HT, UK). Sick individuals and sick populations. International Journal of Epidemiology 1985;14:32–38.
David Kennedy, Don’t Shoot: One Man, a Street Fellowship, and the End of Violence in Inner-City America (2012) [pp. 44-75].
Film: Steve James, The Interrupters, 2011. Available online at: https://to.pbs.org/2EvelAT
Session 13 – Evidence into action: Environmental interventions and gun violence

12/13/21  Just as changes in the built environment have proven crucial in reducing motor vehicle accidents and addressing infectious disease, a growing body of research suggests place-based interventions can have a role in curbing gun violence.

Learning Objectives:
1. Explain how randomized control trials can be used to study gun violence.
2. Summarize research on urban blight and violence.

Required readings:


Optional readings:


Session 14 – Student presentations: New frontiers of gun violence prevention

12/20/21  We will devote this session to listening to student presentations, and then will wrap up with a group discussion of what we take from the course as a whole.
MOSES CENTER FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:
If you are a student with a disability who is requesting accommodations, please contact New York University’s Moses Center for Students with Disabilities. You must be registered with CSD to receive accommodations. Information about the Moses Center can be found at www.nyu.edu/csd. The Moses Center is located at 726 Broadway on the second floor.

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS:
NYU’s policy is to accommodate students’ observances of religious holidays. In order to receive accommodation, you must notify the instructor during the first two weeks of the semester of any planned absences related to religious observance. Further details on NYU’s policies may be found at: http://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/university-calendar-policy-on-religious-holidays.html

ACADEMIC HONESTY
Intellectual integrity is the university’s most fundamental commitment. Plagiarism of any kind will be penalized to the fullest possible extent, without warning or exception.

The most common causes of plagiarism are not deliberate dishonesty, but stress and uncertainty. You are encouraged to begin assignments well in advance of the deadline, and to check with the instructor if you have any questions. Whenever you draw upon somebody else’s words or ideas to make a point, give them credit in a note. If you have questions about documentation requirements, don’t guess – just ask.
For further details on university policy, strictly adhered to in this class, see: http://cas.nyu.edu/page/ug.academicintegrity