

How cascading crises in 2020 led to record high gun sales



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University of Arizona researcher Jennifer Carlson says she and other sociologists see gun business as a telltale sign of what's going on in the American psyche. If that is the case, Americans in 2020 were afraid.

In 2020, the FBI conducted 39.7 million background checks for gun purchases—a 40% increase over 2019's record totals. January 2021 set a new monthly record, with 4.3 million firearm background checks.

It's not hard to guess some of the reasons; 2020 was a year of cascading crises that continued into 2021, including the COVID-19 pandemic, racial unrest, and political instability.

Carlson, an associate professor in the School of Sociology in the UArizona College

of Social and Behavioral Sciences, has spent over a decade examining how guns shape American life. Last spring, she received a National Science Foundation grant to chronicle the surge in gun purchases in the U.S. in 2020. From April to August, she interviewed more than 50 gun sellers in Arizona, California, Florida, and Michigan.

In September, Carlson's newest book, "Policing the Second Amendment: Guns, Law Enforcement and the Politics of Race" was released by Princeton University Press. For the book, she interviewed more than 80 police chiefs to examine the relationship between gun politics and public law enforcement.

This month, Carlson is gathering gun experts across the country for a free, online "Guns in Crisis" series. In advance of the series, UArizona News spoke with Carlson about the spike in gun sales in 2020; the complicated relationship between guns, police, and race; and how we can talk about guns in nonpolitical terms.

Q. As part of your NSF grant looking at the rise of gun sales in 2020, you interviewed gun sellers across the country. What were some of your most surprising findings?

A: This was a really dramatic year in terms of gun sales. The year 2020 started off pretty slow for many gun sellers in January, and then there was a dramatic, night-and-day shift. At some point in March, gun sellers across the country woke up to lines out the door. And gun sales continue to surge.

In terms of timing, the sales clearly correlated with the coronavirus pandemic, and, so, the big question becomes, "How do you connect gun sales to a public health crisis?"

Gun sellers' reports about why people were buying guns related to uncertainty. The fact that people were going to the grocery store and there was no toilet paper, that places were shut down, people were getting laid off—there is this sense of uncertainty and chaos.

The striking aspect of 2020, though, is that this becomes a moment when guns become appealing to a much broader sector of the population who either thought about getting a gun but never took that step, or were adamantly opposed to guns and gun ownership.

While the surveys show that conservative white men are disproportionately likely to own guns in this country, gun sellers told me they saw a surge in gun purchasing among first-time gun owners. I heard lots of reports of more women, more people of color, and more people from the LGBTQ community purchasing guns.

But on the flip side of that, I heard a lot of concerns from gun sellers about people who shouldn't have guns. Not in the sense that they had a criminal record or something else legally disqualifying, but that they were worried about selling to irresponsible, panicked people. Sometimes, this reflected a concern about putting a gun in the hands of someone who didn't understand firearms handling or safe storage. But other times, it seemed to be code for "liberals"—a fascinating expression of political partisanship that I'm unpacking in my next book, "Not a Bang but a Whimper."

Q. There were a series of crises in 2020 in addition to COVID—from racial unrest to economic insecurity to political instability—that may have contributed to gun sales. How does that point to the various reasons people buy guns?

A: I talk about 2020 as a year of multi-layered crises, and it was definitely very interesting to me to see how guns fit into these different crises. For many people, each of these crises boiled down to an unraveling of the social safety net. ... If the social safety net that people thought was there is not there, guns basically become a tool of last resort.

An upcoming election always drives up gun sales, especially if it looks like a Democrat is going to win. But this year, there was also fundamental uncertainty about the election itself. Talking to gun sellers, I was struck by how often they told me that no matter the outcome, this would be a contested election. And they were right.

Q. Has this past year changed gun culture in this country?

With this shift to first-time gun buyers, I think the question is: Does owning a gun make you part of gun culture?

You may buy a gun in the context of acute insecurity when you find that for the first time in your life you can't go to the store and buy toilet paper, but that

doesn't necessarily mean that you've invested in the broader political project that's represented by pro-gun politics. So I think that's a question that's still waiting to be unraveled.

Q. In your latest book, you talk about “gun militarism” and “gun populism.” What do those terms mean?

A: My book “Policing the Second Amendment” engages double standards in policing, focusing on gun law enforcement. The book is about this basic question of who is considered a “good guy with a gun” versus a “bad guy with a gun,” how race animates that, and how that shapes law enforcement.

I found when I talked to police chiefs that there's two ways that they understand guns in the hands of private civilians: as objects of danger or objects of social order. I like to think of these different ways of understanding as different kinds of “gun talk.” With “gun militarism” gun talk, guns are talked about as objects of danger in the hands of private civilians, while police position themselves as needing guns to disarm the enemy. We know from existing scholarship that the “warrior” mindset is disproportionately at play in the policing of communities of color—and I found that gun militarism often arose in my own conversations with police chiefs in reference to gun violence associated with communities of color, such as gang violence. However, I also heard “gun populism” gun talk when police chiefs talked about gun carriers as (potential) fellow first responders, especially in reference to mass shootings, which are often associated with white rural and suburban communities. Here, police chiefs tended to talk about themselves not as warriors but as guardians—a stark contrast to how they saw themselves vis-à-vis urban gun violence.

Q. How can we talk about guns in nonpolitical terms?

A: This is the million-dollar question. ... The more I research guns and gun politics in the U.S., the more I am convinced that when we're talking about addressing the issue of guns, we need to talk trauma. The appeal of guns, the way we talk about guns, the harm that guns can inflict—it's all wrapped up in trauma and, frankly, our society's very poor way of dealing with it.

There are roughly 40,000 people killed by guns every year. That's 40,000 families and communities who are devastated by that loss. That's a lot more than 40,000 people. Then there are the roughly 80,000 to 100,000 people injured every year

with guns. And then there are the innumerable people who are impacted by the fear of gun violence—even if they haven't experienced it yet but feel "anticipatory trauma." Indeed, many of the people who turn to gun ownership do so precisely because they are hoping to protect themselves against trauma, against existential loss, against the unknown of life-changing injury or death.

To move forward in the debate about guns, we have to start talking about trauma, and talking about how we address trauma in society. But that requires vulnerability—and in a context as politically divisive as the U.S. right now, that also requires a whole lot of courage.

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