

PACIFIC★STANDARD

What We Talk About When We Don't Talk About Gun Control

Jared Keller

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Last weekend, an Uber driver in Kalamazoo, Michigan, was arrested in the fatal shooting of six people. Reuters reports that police suspect the man, identified as 45-year-old Jason Dalton, opened fire "apparently at random" on pedestrians in three separate locations, all while picking up unsuspecting fares between shootings. Subsequent reporting has uncovered warning signs: MLive reported that 15 firearms—11 "long guns" and four handguns—were recovered from Dalton's home, and a longtime friend of Dalton's characterized him as "a staunch Second Amendment supporter who feared that recent mass shootings could lead to gun control," according to Kalamazoo's local NBC News affiliate.

But, apart from the now-routine call for gun control by President Barack Obama, the focus in the aftermath of Dalton's rampage hasn't been on guns. Instead, the common narrative surrounding the Kalamazoo spree has centered on Uber's screening practices, even though police told CNN that Dalton had no prior mental health history (the company had received a complaint about Dalton). Joe Sullivan, Uber's chief security officer, told Reuters that the car hailing service would not change its security screening process: "There were no red flags, if you will, that we could anticipate something like this."

It's somewhat ironic that this strange diversion comes amid another seemingly unrelated incident. Apple and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have been sparring over whether the government agency can force the technology giant to decrypt an iPhone that belonged to one of the San Bernardino shooters, turning what should be a conversation about terrorism and gun control (more than 2,000 terror suspects legally purchased guns between 2004 and 2014) into a war over encryption. Outside the requisite calls for stronger gun restrictions by California lawmakers and, again, Obama, the national conversation has largely moved off of gun control, a trend we've seen since the Newtown massacre when support for gun rights increased despite the slaughter of 20 children and six teachers.

This, it seems, is the cycle of our political will when it comes to guns. A mass shooting leads to calls for control from lawmakers, a flurry of reporting from media outlets, and a spate of social media campaigns, then poof: The American public moves on. Yet while active shooting situations are occurring more frequently than ever (the 12 deadliest shootings in the United

States happened after 2007, according to the Washington Post), gun control is actually becoming less and less politically popular. "Less than half of Americans, 47 percent, say they favor stricter laws covering the sale of firearms, similar to views found last year," according to Gallup, far below the 62 percent in 2000 and the spike to 58 percent after the Newtown massacre in 2012.

Countries around the world have summoned the political will to address epidemics of gun violence. Australia, for example, passed a bill banning semi-automatic rifles and shotguns and instigating a buyback of more than 600,000 firearms just 12 days after a gunman killed 35 people at a resort town in 1996, according to Slate. And a recent study indicated that the gulf in gun deaths separating the U.S. from other advanced nations is only getting wider. So why can't the American polity put an end to the nation's epidemic of violence?

A 2004 study of American, British, and Australian youths in *Aggressive Behavior* found that Americans were more likely to favor gun possession, hold it to be a citizen's right to own a gun, and believe that guns provide protection from crime. By contrast, Australian and British respondents were more likely to believe guns stimulate crime rather than prevent it. Similarly, an analysis of American and British women's attitudes toward guns in *Social Psychology* found that "U.S. women were more likely to perceive guns as expressions of freedom or independence, and the U.K. women were more likely to view guns as expressions of danger and violence." And, according to data from the World Value Survey, between 2010 and 2014, Americans were far more likely than citizens of any other advanced nation to say they'd carried a gun for the purposes of protection. Meanwhile, the number of gun deaths per capita in the U.S. is nearly 30 times that of the U.K., with 372 mass shootings in 2015 alone.

This is where we come to the media: If, to paraphrase Mark Twain, it is indeed the press' purpose to not just report the news, but to get people mad enough to do something about it, then why is the press fixated on the tech angle—the Ubers and iPhones—and not the flow of guns that made the tragedies in Kalamazoo and San Bernardino possible in the first place?

This isn't to say that the press consistently and systematically ignores the biggest issues facing the country. After all, the most popular terms on television news in the four months after the Newtown massacre were "Newtown" and "gun control," according to the Pew Research Center. But it's also clear that Newtown, arguably the most horrifying mass shooting in recent memory, did little to move the needle on the conversation: Gun and ammo purchases spiked, state and federal legislation stalled, Obama's executive actions became a talking point in the endless debate over the 10th Amendment, and nothing really changed at all. As the *Telegraph's* Dan Hodges observed in the wake of the Charleston massacre: "In retrospect Sandy Hook marked the end of the U.S. gun control debate. Once America decided killing children was bearable, it was over."

This may, frankly, be why we don't talk about gun control anymore: We've become habituated to gun crime. We're living in a state of complacency, of willful submission to the wave of gun violence that's engulfed the U.S. The best term for this might be "epistemic closure," an epistemological term adapted by the Cato Institute's Julian Sanchez in 2010 to describe the extreme confirmation bias deployed by the then-insurgent Tea Party. "Reality is defined by a multimedia array of interconnected and cross promoting conservative blogs, radio programs,

magazines, and of course, Fox News," Sanchez explained. "Whatever conflicts with that reality can be dismissed out of hand because it comes from the liberal media, and is therefore ipso facto not to be trusted."

Having a factual, informed, non-traumatic conversation on gun control isn't just unthinkable; the concept of gun control as a viable piece of legislation is seemingly impossible, and is therefore excluded from rational conversation. The American polity and media have all but given up on discussing gun control in any substantive way, knowing that all roads lead to gridlock in Congress and shouting matches on cable news.

Late last night, Reuters reported that three people had been killed by an unknown gunman at a work site in Hesston, Kansas. The cycle of America's political will is already kicking into gear, but nothing will come of it. Chances are, the topic will move to mental health sooner than it does guns. As far as the voting and thinking public is concerned, gun control is an intellectual non-starter—and it's going to stay that way through the next San Bernardino, the next Kalamazoo, and the next Hesston.