

Professor: Don't expect sweeping gun reform after Newtown shootings

January 22 2014, by Megan Schmidt

The Dec. 14 massacre at a Newtown, Conn., elementary was the second-deadliest school shooting in American history.

Despite the bloodshed, Americans probably shouldn't expect sweeping reform when it comes to gun control policies, said Don Haider-Markel, University of Kansas political science professor.

"Every time a [mass shooting](#) happens, there seems to be a potential for significant change," Haider-Markel said. "Our opinion is policy will probably only change if people's opinions about the causes of these shootings change."

With fellow KU professor Mark Joslyn, Haider-Markel co-authored "The Politics of Causes: Mass Shootings and the Cases of the Virginia Tech and Tucson Tragedies" in 2011, examining how people determine who—or what—they feel is responsible for a mass shooting.

Their analyses showed people favor causal attributions that reinforce their own political views.

Respondents for the study were polled following the 2007 massacre of 32 people at Virginia Tech and the 2011 assassination attempt on U.S. Rep. Gabby Giffords, in which six people died, in Arizona.

The research found Republicans were more likely to attribute the causes of gun-related tragedies to the assailant, his character and beliefs.

Democrats were more likely to cite external influences on individual behavior, such as permissive gun control laws and institutional neglect of the mentally ill.

This was true of congressional Democrats and Republicans following the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School. Democrats framed the shooting as a result of weak gun laws, while Republicans focused their attention on violence in the media.

These findings may seem unsurprising, but they lead to lack of consensus and partisan polarization, preventing meaningful action being taken to avoid future mass homicides.

"Many people make the attribution that it's actually very difficult for the government to do anything about it," Haider-Markel said. "In Columbine, many blamed the shooters or the shooters' parents. In the end, there's a plethora of causes, but nobody has a solid idea of a cause that links to a policy issue, other than gun control."

In other countries, mass shootings have spurred new [gun control](#) policies. Following a 1996 [school shooting](#) in Dunblane, Scotland, that left 16 children and a teacher dead, the government outlawed civilian handgun ownership.

School security is one factor that has improved following mass shootings. For example, many universities began using text message alerts in crises only after the Virginia Tech massacre—although Haider-Markel points out texting has become prevalent in only the last several years.

"(In Newtown), it seems like the school had decent security precautions in place," he said. "Many schools have everything in place, short of armed security, which is not practical."

Provided by University of Kansas

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