

Q&A: Gun violence pressures elected officials to make reforms

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With three mass shooting within a week leaving 24 Californians dead,

public policy makers are searching for answers.

Six people on Jan. 16 were found fatally shot inside a home in the Central Valley community of Goshen, Calif., in a case police believe could be tied to organized crime.

On Saturday, Jan. 21, a 72-year-old man walked into the Star Ballroom Dance Studio in Monterey Park in Southern California and opened fire, killing 11. The gunman later killed himself.

On Monday afternoon, Jan. 23, seven more people were killed in two shootings in rural farms in Half Moon Bay in Northern California that authorities say are connected. A 66-year-old man who worked at one of the farms has been arrested.

For a perspective on what this most recent spate of deadly gun violence may mean for [public policy](#) in California and beyond, we asked University of California, Riverside, public policy associate professor Benjamin J. Newman to answer questions raised by the violence. Newman is a faculty affiliate at the Robert Presley Center for Crime and Justice Studies at UCR.

Do you believe that this violence will spur legislation aimed at increasing public safety, such as more stringent background checks, limits on the number of bullets per reloading, and bans on kits that make legally purchased guns more lethal?

Newman: The best answer is that it depends. My research analyzing the effect of public mass shootings over the past decade shows that the level of national news coverage given to a shooting makes all the difference. When the media pay a lot of attention to a shooting, we are more likely to see the American people engage with gun policy in a variety of ways,

including signing petitions for greater gun control and donating money to gun safety [political organizations](#) that push lawmakers for more regulations. These behaviors by ordinary citizens can have downstream effects by pushing lawmakers to act for gun reform. However, when public mass shootings are given only a little media attention, we predictably see very little engagement among ordinary citizens.

Why have so many past mass shootings faded from public consciousness with no or little policy changes aimed at making us safer?

Researchers, such as Danny Hayes at George Washington University, suggest that mass shootings succumb to a process called the issue-attention cycle, where there are incentives for the media to cover shootings for a week or two, but then move onto other issues to keep the attention of their audience and avoid what other scholars have coined "crisis fatigue," whereby viewers avoid sustained attention to issues that are painful or depressing. We know from past research that certain types of mass shootings, such as those occurring in public venues (schools, [grocery stores](#), churches, commercial venues, etc.) and with higher victim counts tend to receive greater media attention.

Pro-gun politicians, many financially backed by the powerful National Rifle Association, have effectively blocked various gun control legislative efforts for decades. Do you believe this political logjam will persist for years if not decades to come?

My research suggests the answer could be NO. The reason why is that my research has rendered two findings: (1) Americans' whose lives have been touched by mass shootings are more supportive of gun control, and

(2) public mass shootings garnering a lot of media attention spur Americans into political action and the tilt of this action is toward gun control. Thus, with the increase in occurrence and deadliness of public [mass shootings](#), more and more Americans will be touched personally by gun violence, and thus, the foundation of support for gun control will grow. All it may require is politicians who are brave enough to seize on this shifting climate of public opinion.

Given the political climate, what can California do to reduce gun violence?

Most of the credible research out there shows that imposing restrictions on access to firearms reduces gun violence. Very simple and very straightforward. Make it more difficult to obtain guns and there will be less gun violence. At least this is what the research suggests.

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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