

AMERICAN EPIDEMIC

GUNS IN THE UNITED STATES

“Even if it’s not happening in your community,
it’s happening in the community of America.”

—Nicole Hockley, mother of Dylan, a first grader who was killed
in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting

WHEN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC hit the United States in March 2020, gun sales spiked. Then, as spring turned to summer and the country experienced widespread protests over police brutality toward Black lives, US gun sales continued to increase, with no drop after the November presidential election. By the end of 2020 gun sales were up 64 percent from the previous year and have not slowed since: spring 2021 saw an all-time record of 1.2 million gun purchases in a single week.¹ Meanwhile this increase in gun ownership has been accompanied by rising injuries and deaths by firearms, with 2020 becoming the deadliest year of gun violence in the United States in at least two decades.² Notably, this surge in shooting deaths appears related to circumstances that were intensified during the pandemic, including deep-rooted inequity, shutdowns and job losses compounding stress, anti-crime efforts hampered, soaring gun ownership, and a collapse in public confidence in law enforcement after the murder of George Floyd. By almost every measure, 2021 looks like it will be worse: The number of shootings in the first five months of 2021 that have killed or injured at least one person exceeds the same period in 2020, amounting to 54 lives lost per day.³ In short, gun deaths and injuries in the United States have become a major public health crisis—one that is unparalleled in the developed world.

Long before the pandemic, the United States already led the world in private gun ownership, with approximately 120 firearms per 100 residents. To put this figure into perspective, the next two top civilian gun-owning countries are Yemen, with 52 firearms per 100 residents, and Serbia, with 39 firearms per 100 residents.⁴ Our two closest neighbors, Canada and Mexico, have 34 and 12 guns, respectively, per 100 residents.⁵ It is estimated that currently 39 percent of American households contain at least one gun.⁶ Research has shown that higher gun prevalence—the very *presence* of a gun—is associated with a higher rate of gun deaths and injuries. Having a gun in the home puts every household member at increased risk of death by firearm, by homicide or suicide.⁷

Gun violence is not singular. It encompasses many types of violence—suicide, domestic assault, mass shootings, accidents, police violence, community violence—that are exacerbated by easy access to firearms in the United States. And the statistics to be culled from gun violence are thus as staggering as the data on gun ownership: Every year about 40,000 Americans are killed by guns. Of those, the majority are suicides, at about 60 percent, followed by homicides at 37 percent, and the remainder are accidental or other types of deaths.⁸ Compared with other developed nations, the United States has a higher rate of gun ownership and higher homicide rate, but not higher rates for other crimes.⁹ In 2019 killings involving a gun accounted for 73 percent of all homicides in the United States. That is a much larger proportion of homicides than in Canada (39 percent), Australia (22 percent), and England and Wales (4 percent).¹⁰ And although gun homicide rates have fallen dramatically since the late 1980s and 1990s, they seem

to be spiking again recently, with a reported 25 percent increase of gun homicide and non-suicide-related shootings in 2020.¹¹ And mass shootings—those in which four or more people are shot and injured or killed in the incident—also escalated in 2020, with nearly a 50 percent increase over 2019's total.¹²

The Second Amendment to the US Constitution is often cited as the reason for the laxness of gun control laws in the United States. It ambiguously reads: “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” Whether that statement guarantees the rights of individuals to bear arms or only those individuals in militias is at the crux of the gun control debate. Partially stemming from a long history of distrust of standing armies in the United States in favor of militias,¹³ which were used in many cases to quell uprisings by enslaved people, many Americans cling to the notion that a person's right to bear arms is the greatest protection of their individual liberty and a safeguard of democracy. Yet no other democracy in the world protects any such “right” to the extent that the United States does, and the US remains much more reluctant to enact gun control legislation than other wealthy nations.

The United States has long been enamored with firearms. From the European settlers who brought and crafted guns to fight the American Revolution, hunt for game, and battle with indigenous populations, this country was virtually founded on gunfire. After the frontier era, guns continued to be used for hunting and were popular for sport, as learning to shoot became a rite of passage for young boys. In the twentieth century, guns became a standard ingredient of entertainment in Westerns and TV shows. Ultimately, guns became aligned with the concept of masculinity and considered a safeguard of individualism. The United States is a gun culture—and for many Americans, guns are a symbol of freedom and Americanness that is romanticized and deeply ingrained within the American psyche.¹⁴

The history of guns in the United States is also deeply entwined with racism, and an intersectional analysis of gun violence is critical to understanding the complexities of the gun control issue and how different communities are impacted, as there are many inequities surrounding guns in terms of gender and race. Throughout American history, for example, carrying a gun in public has been coded as white privilege: From colonial America when white landowners could carry guns but slaves and freed Black men could not, to the Ku Klux Klan's mission to disarm Black people, to the fact that gun control legislation didn't make any great strides until the Civil Rights era when the Black Panthers and their supporters started carrying guns in public, it is clear that gun culture in the United States is entwined with white privilege. Jonathan M. Metzler, a professor of sociology and psychiatry at Vanderbilt University, has argued that we gain a better understanding of the US gun control debate when it is viewed in the context of whiteness and white supremacy. He has provocatively asked, “Who gets to carry a gun in public? Who is coded as a patriot? Who is coded as a threat, or a terrorist, or a gangster? What it means to carry a gun, or own a gun, or buy a gun—those questions are not neutral. We have two hundred years of history, or more, defining that in very racial terms.”¹⁵

Furthermore, studies have drawn parallels between racism and having a gun in the home and opposition to gun control among US whites. Racism and conservative ideologies appear to be related to a fear of Black violence and crime, driving up the opposition to gun control in white communities.¹⁶ Yet white men are the ones most often killed by gunfire, and most of them die from suicide,¹⁷ not from an outside threat, meaning that arguments against gun reform based on self-defense or protection are counterintuitive. Whites oppose strong gun reform more than all other racial groups¹⁸ despite a much greater likelihood to experience gun death and injury, and in the process they inhibit policies that would improve public health.

It is not easy to assess the cost of soft gun laws on public health, but with research showing that simple measures such as background checks and waiting periods can substantially reduce gun deaths and injuries, most gun owners believe gun purchases should be at least somewhat regulated.¹⁹ The statistics

do suggest that treatment: There is a correlation between a state's gun laws and its rate of homicide per 100,000 residents. For example, the average firearm homicide rate in states without background checks is 58 percent higher than the average in states with background check laws in place.²⁰ Currently, only 21 states and the District of Columbia require background checks.²¹

The power of guns in American culture—an attachment to firearms as a representation of personal liberty, even as personal liberty is stolen from those who fall victim to them—has created an epidemic of self-harm, aggression, and accidents. With courage and honesty, the artists featured in this exhibition lay bare horrifying statistics and tragic human stories of guns in America, making works that reflect a passionate activism based in a deep desire for social justice—and seek the preservation of American lives.

In 1990 when **Felix Gonzalez-Torres** (American, b. Cuba, 1957–1996) made *“Untitled” (Death by Gun)*, gun homicide rates in the United States had been on the rise for decades.²² Concerned by the prevalence of gun deaths in his adopted country and using an article from *Time* magazine that chronicled all of the deaths by firearms in the United States during a one-week period in May 1989, Gonzalez-Torres created an artwork consisting of individual sheets of paper printed with a graphic from the article that compiled the names, ages, locations, and circumstances surrounding the deaths of the 460 victims. Each victim is represented by either a headshot or a silhouette, injecting an intimacy into the communal significance of the project. Neatly stacked on the floor, the printed sheets create a clean, minimalist shape whose replenishable layers mirror the endlessness of gun violence. The viewer is invited to take one, breaching the passivity that is often expected in museums, and creating a transportable memorial to the many and myriad types of gun deaths in this country.

It is a country long enamored with firearms. The ubiquity of guns in American culture is explored in the work of photographer **Nancy Floyd** (American, b. 1956) who, like Gonzalez-Torres, was thinking deeply about guns in the early 1990s. In 1991 she bought a gun in an effort to better understand her deceased brother, who had been a gun enthusiast. At the time Floyd was afraid of guns, had negative preconceptions of gun owners, and knew that women are disproportionately affected by gun violence, but she soon found that she enjoyed shooting and being in the company of other gun owners, particularly women. The experience became a long-term project called *She's Got a Gun* (1993–2008), which depicts American women from many walks of life proudly displaying their firearms paired with excerpts from interviews describing their relationship to guns. From women who own guns for reasons of pleasure like recreational shooting or competition, to women who own guns for self-defense, to women who use guns professionally, the project subtly reveals the complex attitudes that society has toward women and gun ownership. Importantly, by revealing the meanings and values that women associate with gun ownership, the project tells a story of guns in the United States that reaches beyond deaths and injuries to provide a broad understanding of gun ownership that scholars argue is key to more effective gun legislation.²³

The stress of living in a society saturated by guns is perhaps most acutely felt by young Americans, as 57 percent of today's teenagers say they fear a school shooting.²⁴ (Notably, March 2020, when a significant portion of schools in the United States were temporarily closed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, was the first March to pass without a school shooting since 2002, the year most 2020 high school seniors were born.²⁵) Whenever this quintessentially American phenomenon, mass shootings in school, occurs, it typically generates intense, albeit fleeting, conversation about gun control. And even though these tragedies account for a very small percentage of US deaths and injuries by gun, school shootings draw the most attention from media outlets. They seem to shock us into a brief period of determination to reform gun laws, although major policy changes don't materialize.

In his project *American Origami* (2019), **Andres Gonzalez** (American, b. 1977) probes the cyclic phenomenon of school shootings in the United States and their impact on communities and the national psyche. Gonzalez started the project soon after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut, which killed twenty first graders and eight adults. Gonzalez had just returned to the country after living abroad for many years, and the Sandy Hook massacre “colored everything I was thinking about this country,” he says.²⁶ Over six years he visited seven of the deadliest school shootings in recent decades: Columbine High School (1999; 15 deaths, 24 injuries), Red Lake High School (2005; 10 deaths, 5 injuries), Virginia Tech (2007; 33 deaths, 23 injuries), Northern Illinois University (2008; 6 deaths, 21 injuries), Sandy Hook Elementary (2006; 28 deaths, 2 injuries), Umpqua Community College (2015; 10 deaths, 8 injuries), and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High (2018; 17 deaths, 17 injuries).

The project’s title comes from the Japanese tradition of folding 1,000 paper cranes as a symbol of hope and healing in response to death and disaster. It also evokes ideas of repetition and transformation, appropriate for school shootings, which seem to continually occur. Originally created as a book, *American Origami* weaves together photographs, interviews, and forensic documents to examine the recurring tragedy of mass shootings and the lingering aftermath experienced by the communities in which they occur. Gonzalez also includes texts of speeches given by US Presidents Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump immediately following mass shootings—public comments that reveal the difficulty of reconciling and finding comfort after such events, as well as the inadequacy of platitudes such as “thoughts and prayers.” Taking particular interest in the memorial objects left at the scene by mourners, most of whom do not know the victims, Gonzalez contemplated the rituals around healing and how we attempt to make sense of such abominations. For Gonzalez, the fact that most of the communities have fastidiously catalogued and preserved the objects while keeping those archives entirely out of public view is an interesting parallel to how we try to paradoxically remember and forget these events. Similarly, the ordinariness and quietude of his unpeopled landscapes conceal the harrowing history they hold.

An intersectional analysis of gun deaths and injuries in the United States is critical to understanding the complexities of the gun control issue and how different communities are impacted, as there are many inequities surrounding guns in terms of gender and race. In his project *At No Point In Between* (2019), **Zora J Murff** (American, b. 1987) probes complex histories of systemic racism and white supremacy and the violence they have engendered in the United States. Inspired by the shooting of Laquan McDonald by police officer Jason Van Dyke in Chicago in 2014, the project exposes how cycles of oppressive systems have led to severe inequity and injustice for people of color. Murff photographed in the neighborhood of North Omaha, Nebraska—a place, like many American neighborhoods, where racist practices such as redlining, the process in which banks denied mortgages to borrowers in non-white neighborhoods during the early to mid-twentieth century, led to issues that persist today, including poor services, underfunded schools, and lower property values. Today, more youth of color are affected by gun violence than their white counterparts, due largely to a lack of investment in communities such as North Omaha.²⁷

Evidence of this slow, structural violence that causes lasting harm to neighborhoods is reflected in Murff’s streetscapes of North Omaha. Views of crumbling, boarded-up buildings, homes, and intersections are paired with evidence of departed businesses and views of the highway that was constructed through the heart of the neighborhood and displaced hundreds of Black families in 1975. Within these landscapes Murff places striking portraits of a cross section of North Omaha’s current residents—a father holds his young son; a boy cradles his basketball; a woman sits in the shadows of dappled light, radiant in her yellow dress.

Throughout his images of North Omaha Murff peppers archival images that demonstrate the all-too-frequent spectacle of sudden violence against Black people. Included in this set are the harrowing, widely

circulated images from the police shootings of Laquan McDonald and Walter Scott, as well as portraits of Will Brown, who was lynched during the Omaha race riot of 1919, and Vivian Strong, who was shot by Omaha police in 1969. These juxtapositions illustrate that although the nature of witnessing has changed—with technology and the internet providing more opportunities for voyeurism—the spectacle of the Black individual as an object to be commodified and consumed persists.

Like guns, cameras, including who uses them, and how, are not neutral, and Murff has pointed out that throughout the history of photography, white people have decided how Black people are seen. “White supremacy is deeply engrained in the practice of image-making,”²⁸ he explains. In one central image, Murff appropriates the image of Walter Scott running away from police officer Michael Slager moments before Scott was shot dead. Murff has spoken about his project as being about all of the layers that exist beneath that image, including murder by police, redlining, and other manifestations of large, violence-causing structures in this country. While the project serves as a biting meditation on racialized terror in the United States and the militarization of the police force, it is ultimately driven by a refusal to accept the way things have been visually chronicled and categorized throughout history. In the epitaph of the book version of the project, Murff writes: “We can see the mark that has already been made. If we look and continue to ignore, the false image of Blackness will remain the fixed image.”²⁹ As the poignant start of a corrective, Murff offers elegant portraits of residents of North Omaha as embodiments of resilience and hope.

Stephen Foster (American, b. 1992) is similarly interested in excavating manifestations of racism through an analysis of the systems and institutions that perpetuate inequity. Long exploring connections between enslavement, mass incarceration, and harm against Black people, Foster probes rituals of mourning and the long-term, uneven impact of gun violence on communities of color in his video *Libation* (2018). The work is a tribute to Robert “Yummy” Sandifer, an eleven-year-old boy who was working for a gang in Chicago in 1994 and was shot by a rival gang member over fears that he might be an informant. Yummy’s image appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, and he became a symbol of the rise in violent crime by juvenile defenders. Within days of Yummy’s killing, President Bill Clinton signed what is commonly known as the Crime Bill, which increased policing and lowered the age at which a child could be tried as an adult. Instead of focusing on the root causes of why gun deaths and injuries disproportionately affect communities of color, this legislation helped to ramp up the rate of incarceration of Black men and boys, destroy social structures in predominantly Black neighborhoods, and generate record profits for owners of private prisons.

Foster’s video stems from deep concern over such facts and a desire to memorialize lives lost to gun violence. Just like COVID-19, gun deaths and injuries disproportionately affect communities of color. In 2019, for example, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported that although Black men and boys between the ages of 15 and 34 make up just 2 percent of the US population, they were among 37 percent of gun homicides that year—20 times higher than white males of the same age group.³⁰ Based on a still photograph he made to honor the memory of his aunt that depicted the cross-cultural, street-life tradition of memorializing a lost loved one by pouring liquor or beer onto the ground, Foster’s video *Libation* presents the ritual in slow motion and black and white. The audio track is primarily the wails of Yummy’s grandmother at his funeral. Her pain is excruciating to listen to, a visceral and emotional reminder of the ripple effects and psychological trauma of violence experienced by families and communities every day across the United States as a result of decades of disinvestment. As Foster’s contemporary interpretation of Yummy’s story underscores, reducing racial disparities at the intersection of gun violence prevention, law enforcement, and criminal justice is essential.

Carolyn Drake (American, b. 1971) brings awareness of the need for criminal justice reform in her work *One thousand and four Americans were killed by police officers in 2019* (2020). Every year, police in the United States shoot and kill more than 1,000 individuals, a disproportionate number of whom are

people of color.³¹ *The Washington Post* began independently collecting data about police shootings after Michael Brown, an unarmed Black man in Ferguson, Missouri, was killed by police in 2014, finding that the FBI undercounted fatal police shootings by more than half, because many departments do not report the data.³² Imagining that a tactile visualization of this data might elucidate its meaning, Drake procured old police uniforms from eBay and cut them into small tiles. She then created a quilt comprising 1,004 fabric squares—one for each individual killed by police that year. Unlike Gonzalez-Torres, Drake does not include names or specifics of the individuals killed, but rather lets the repeating swaths of fabric relay the magnitude of the number of victims of police brutality, their likeness suggesting both the shooters' and the victims' relative anonymity. The quilt's rigid grid pattern contrasts with the unevenness of Drake's handiwork, adding a human touch to the institutional nature of the fabric and the quilt's gridded design, as she simultaneously undermines the symbolic power of the dark blue fabric by recontextualizing and destroying it.

Another artist who probes powerful institutions is **Renée Stout** (American, b. 1958). In a direct confrontation of the gun industry and toy manufacturers, her well-known work *Baby's First Gun* (1998) pairs a small cap gun with a toy-like gingerbread-girl cutout, forming a biting sarcastic condemnation of American gun culture. Interested in connections between capitalism, inequity, and violence, Stout places a paper fortune beneath the girl figure that reads, "Society prepares the crime, the criminal commits it." The gun rests on fabric chosen to resemble a crib sheet, and its handle is emblazoned with the first three letters of the alphabet, a detail that the artist found shocking as it is direct evidence that in the United States, children are indoctrinated into gun culture from the time they are born. On the outside of the box, Stout paints a donkey red and an elephant blue, reversing the hues and symbols associated with the Democratic and Republican parties, calling out the destructive politicization of the gun control debate. In another, more personal work, *At the Gates of Kalfou* (1998), Stout memorializes the death of a former neighbor, Larry Morgan, who was fatally stabbed after testifying against a teenager on trial for the shooting death of his friend. Morgan is depicted in this small painting and collage work surrounded by symbols relating to Kalfou and the deity Eleggba, the spirit of the crossroads, including one for violence and misfortune.

Like Stout, **Hank Willis Thomas** (American, b. 1976) and **Kambui Olujimi** (American, b. 1976) are interested in examining the indoctrination of Americans into gun culture. Their stop-action video *Winter in America* (2006) is based on the murder of Songha Thomas Willis, Hank's cousin, who was shot and killed outside of a club in Philadelphia in 2000. Thomas and Olujimi reenact the murder in the video using G.I. Joe action figures, toys that usually come with guns and are marketed to young boys. "As boys in the United States, we're given action figures with guns and encouraged to create scenarios based around violence," he says. "We then turn around and say it's a shame when gun violence happens."

The video includes a view of a billboard with one of Willis Thomas's own images of a Nike swoosh scarred into a man's head, recalling the branding of enslaved people by their owners, underscored by one of the murderers proclaiming "Just do it" before Songha is shot, a piercing indictment of the representation and consumption of Black people in the United States.

Songha's death has had profound influence on Willis Thomas's artistic practice,³³ and he has worked extensively on the topic of gun violence over the years. Recently he created an immersive installation of blue banners stitched with 14,719 white stars representing the number of Americans who were shot and killed in the United States in 2018. In 2020 he created *The Gun Violence Memorial Project* together with Mass Design Group and in partnership with gun violence prevention organizations Purpose Over Pain and the Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, comprising a set of four glass houses where family members of those lost to gun violence are invited to place remembrance objects. "All you have to be is alive in America and you can fall victim to gun violence," he has said.³⁴

And finally, after her mother was murdered by a firearm, **Deborah Luster** took up photography as a way to come to grips with her death. Eventually she created her project *Tooth for an Eye* (2011) in which she visits sites of recent and historical homicides in New Orleans and creates hauntingly charged cityscapes empty of people. In making the project she observed that whereas murders in the 1970s and 80s were often committed by beating or stabbing, since the late 1980s most murders are conducted with a gun. The images are printed in a circular format that mimics a gunshot hole or the view through a sight of a gun. For Luster, the format is also a way to reference the ongoing, circular, cycle of violence in the United States and the profound void formed by so many lives lost.

The United States is struggling with unceasing gun violence, and the challenge of balancing risk and rights concerning gun ownership is increasingly fraught. Although it is impossible for any exhibition to delve into every issue relating to gun ownership and violence in the United States, the ten artists featured here consider the implications of guns in our country through important historical, intersectional, and compassionate lenses. Early in his presidency, President Biden allocated \$5 billion over eight years to fund gun violence prevention programs. Steps like these, especially those that address the factors that increase the risk of gun violence, particularly in communities disproportionately impacted, could reverse current trends. And when it comes to gun deaths and injuries, the figures make clear that the lives and experiences of women and people of color must be given unique attention. Julius Thibodeaux Jr, strategy program manager at Advance Peace, calls gun violence “the forgotten pandemic.” Indeed, as the works in this exhibition reflect sorrow, they also impart urgency, together sounding a call to action, imploring us to treat gun violence not as a matter of law and order, but as a public health crisis.

Karen Irvine

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Endnotes

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