

Gun Violence and Mass Shooting Through the Concepts, Theories, And Frameworks

Discussed in The Birkland Textbook

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Since the 1998 shooting at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas, mass shootings have become common in the United States (Rogowski & Tucker, 2019). However, during the Obama administration, the country witnessed a surge in attention to the issue of gun control in 2012 (Luca et al., 2020), forcing the President to give 23 executive orders to curb gun violence by the end of the year. In addition, President Biden launched the Safer America Plan on July 21 to capitalize on his success in reducing gun violence. When an issue like this gains agenda status, it becomes a social problem that receives attention from political actors (Kingdon, 1984;2003). According to Lawrence and Birkland (2004), this qualifies the subject of gun violence and mass shootings as a "focusing event" as it re-balances public policy and societal practices (Baumgartner & Jones, 2010; Kingdon, 1984).

Focusing on events in the United States, there was the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which drew sustained media awareness and provided evidence of previous policy failure. The policy windows they presented enabled the restructuring of emergency management and hazard mitigation policy in the United States (Birkland, 2019). In addition, focusing on events, such as crises and natural disasters, allows for a change in political reform, learning, and assessing government performance(Birkland, 1995; 2004; Kingdon,2003). The purpose of this essay was to summarize the fundamental concepts, theories, and frameworks discussed in the Birkland textbook and how the issue of mass shootings and related gun violence as a focus event might affect policy and agenda change.

The 1998 Westside Middle School shooting, in which two boys aged 13 and 11 killed four people and wounded 10, forced President Clinton to try and make safe schools for all and determine the cause of mass shootings in schools. The following year, 1999, the Columbine school massacre in Colorado, where two boys killed ten students and one teacher before committing

suicide, drew significantly more media attention across various problems than any subsequent school violence occurrence and brought attention to the mental health issue in children. One would think Columbine would have impacted public policy with the coverage it received. However, Columbine's impact on public opinion and the character and substance of public policy was minimal. In 2007, the Virginia Tech shooting that left 32 dead and 17 wounded received international media coverage and criticism of the U.S. gun culture. The Virginia Tech shooting prompted the State of Virginia to close the legal loopholes that allowed mentally unsound people to purchase guns. This shooting also led President Bush to sign a law as the first Federal gun control measure since 1994 to strengthen the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) (Cochran, 2008). The Sandy Hook Shooting led to the proposal of many federal and state laws. While the Biden task force formed by Obama was vying for increased gun control, the National Rifle Association (NRA) opposed these laws. Wayne Pierre, Executive Vice President of the NRA, was quoted saying, "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."

John Kingdon invented the phrase focusing event in his 1984 work *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policy*, which serves as the cornerstone of the Multiple Stream Framework (MSF) of agenda creation and policy reform (Kingdon, 1984). According to the MSF, the policy process involves three streams of activity that, when combined, give "windows of opportunity" for policy change advocates to push their preferred concerns onto the overloaded government agenda (Kingdon, 1995;1984; Birkland, 2019). First, policies provided as answers to major societal problems are included in the policy stream. The politics stream discusses the partisan makeup of governments, interest-group preferences, and the national mood, which relates to how elected

officials interpret popular choices. Finally, the problem stream discusses the numerous topics competing for policymaker attention.

Indicators, feedback, and focusing events are essential components of the problem stream. Statistics and other measures that document changes in a problem are known as indicators. Feedback includes data derived from evaluations of existing government programs. However, as these aspects of policy problems are frequently insufficient to elicit attention, Kingdon contends that pushes take the form of a "crisis or disaster that comes along to call attention to the problem, a powerful symbol that catches on, or a policymaker's personal experience"(2003, pp. 94-95).

Kingdon's notion of focusing events is hazy, discursive, and inductive. Potential focusing events, according to Birkland, are "sudden, relatively infrequent incidents that may legitimately be described as detrimental or indicating the possibility of future damages, that are concentrated on a specific geographical region or community of interest, and that are known to policymakers and the public nearly immediately" (Birkland, 1997, p.22). This refinement allows us to quantify the aspects of an event that make it "focal," notably the event's suddenness, damages (e.g., injuries, fatalities, property destruction), and catastrophic scale. Birkland's emphasis on a future event indicates that predicting whether an event will have sizeable focal power is difficult (1997, p.22).

By refining and clarifying the concept of a focusing event, Birkland's theory provides a more quantitative but slightly narrower grasp than competitor theories' definitions. According to the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), external shocks include not just catastrophes but also other sorts of events, such as swings in public opinion or even deteriorating socioeconomic situations (e.g., a recession) (Sabatier, 1998; Weible et al., 2012). Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) has allowed a relatively broad understanding of focal events or external shocks

(Baumgartner & Jones, 2009), one that covers disasters as well as significant social and institutional developments, such as substantial court judgments (Wood, 2006).

Thomas Birkland writes, "While the concept of focusing events is strongly established in Kingdon's "streams approach" to the policy process, it is an important component of most contemporary policy process theories." However, only some events work well as focus events (2018 Walgrave & Varone, 2008). The process through which a focused event might result in policy change is complex, requiring attention to the problems revealed by the event and evidence of policymakers learning from the event. While focusing on events is crucial, the notion still needs to be mature in many aspects, with few academics attempting to grasp the dynamics of these critical events (Birkland, 2018).

The following paragraph assesses the extent to which the social crisis of mass shootings and gun violence meets Birkland's (1997) definition of a focusing event as (1) sudden and relatively rare; (2) harmful or revealing potential future harms; (3) constrained to a geographical area; and (4) known to policymakers and the public at the same time. First, the issue of mass shootings and gun violence is always shocking and sudden whenever it happens. They are also sporadic, although they are becoming more prolific.

Second, the issue of gun violence is mainly localized in the U.S. and has suffocated the world economy by almost \$557 billion a year (Miller et al., 2022), making it a very different form of a catastrophe than natural and artificial occurrences investigated in the focused events literature.

Third, both politicians and the general public are always aware of the occurrence of mass shootings at the same time, thanks to the comprehensive media coverage and attention given to these social issues.

Finally, the component that mass shootings cause harm is predominantly apparent in the number of deaths. The mass shooting information is consistent with Birkland's lens theory of a focusing event and how it discloses damages (1997). Mass shootings represent only a minor percentage of gun-related deaths in the United States, yet they substantially impact gun policy (Miller et al., 2022). In the year following a mass massacre, more gun prohibitions are suggested. Additionally, mass shootings appear to have far more significant policy consequences per fatality than routine gun killings. These findings are broadly consistent with descriptive studies that have theorized that mass shootings could precipitate change.

Despite years of financial difficulties and internal struggle, the National Rifle Association (NRA) remains the most influential gun lobby in the United States, with a sizable budget to influence lawmakers on gun policy. It and other organizations have regularly spent more on pro-gun rights messaging than their opponents in the gun control lobby over the last three election cycles. As a result, a few states moved to remove most of the limitations on who can carry a firearm. Texas Governor Greg Abbott, for example, signed a "permitless carry bill" into law in June 2021, allowing state residents to carry handguns without a license or training.

Similarly, on April 12, Georgia became the 25th state in the country to repeal the requirement for a permit to conceal or openly carry a firearm. According to the law, any citizen of that state is permitted to have a gun without a license or authorization. The NRA supported the legislation, and officials described it as "a monumental moment for the Second Amendment." There has been momentum toward gun control in the country. However, we still have a long way to go. Nothing is straightforward, and a decision on gun control walks the fine line between someone's right to carry a firearm legitimately.

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