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EDITOR'S NOTE

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1. Introduction

After Sandy Hook, people were beside themselves with grief, just beside itself, with grief. How could this happen? Surely now, surely now Congress will act. And Congress did nothing.¹

It was mostly a gesture, and it had widespread support, and it failed. And that was pretty discouraging.²

- 1 Olivia and Vincent were both longtime gun violence prevention advocates who had experienced many failures during their time as activists.³ Olivia became an advocate in the late 1990s in a state that had been run by the Democratic Party for decades. Vincent, who worked in a state led by the Republican Party, started engaging with the issue after the shooting of Representative Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ) in 2011. They both advocated for gun control policies but also understood the difficulties of passing such

legislation. However, when the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting happened in 2012, they were hopeful that something would change. The closest Congress came to passing gun control legislation was the Manchin-Toomey Amendment of the larger Senate bill on guns (S.649), which was a compromise that attempted to expand background checks to firearm sales online and at gun shows.⁴ The failure to pass the amendment or anything else in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting left a long-lasting mark on the movement and its collective memory no matter in which part of the country one was experiencing it.

- 2 This article is about what came after that moment. In thirty interviews I conducted with gun violence prevention advocates during a nine-month fieldwork period from 2021 to 2022, I explored what activists had been doing for the past two decades, what their goals were, and what they found meaningful in their work. I focused on 1) what their sense of opportunity for change was, and 2) what kind of strategies had emerged as a response to those experiences of openness or closure of opportunities. By analyzing the strategies, goals, and experiences of success and failure that were present in the interviews, I argue that activists have found, after failure, new strategies, creative approaches, and more comprehensive and ambitious solutions to gun violence. Through strategies of community building and everyday acts of resistance, they experienced renewed meaning in the everyday work in between not-success and not-failure.⁵
- 3 Central to my article is the attempt to redefine what success and failure mean for social movements and to examine how failure can be used to reinvigorate activism. I look for theories beyond social movement research and the traditional fields that study it in order to reconsider failure not as a negative outcome but as a necessary feature of activism. Following an American studies approach, I travel across disciplinary boundaries in search of ways to use the concept of failure to better understand how people are contesting power structures in the United States.⁶ Like Haiven and Khasnabish,⁷ I make use of Jack Halberstam's concept of queer art of failure⁸ to look for possibilities, creativity, and another way of doing things that experiences of failure can bring. Like Halberstam, I reflect on Samuel Beckett's call to fail again and fail better.⁹ For Beckett, to be an artist was to master failure and to live in the world of failure.¹⁰ When it comes to failure, the world of the activist is not much different, which is why it is vital to understand and embrace it.
- 4 From social movement research, I make use of political process theory and Rossi's concepts of repertoires of strategies and stocks of legacy, which offers a framework to explain how collective experiences of failure influence strategies of the movement.¹¹ The concepts of repertoires of strategies and stocks of legacy expand Tilly's repertoires of contention that systematically addresses the ways in which people oppose and resist public decisions.¹² Within this theory, Tilly and Tarrow analyzed the mechanisms, processes, and political context of where movements emerge, how these factors influence the actions taken, how movements mobilize people, and what happens after a contentious period.¹³ Consequently, many scholars have studied why movements succeed or fail or fail to appear at all.¹⁴
- 5 This article studies how perceptions of failure by movement members in a context where they do not see opportunities for change can animate new strategies and approaches. In other words, I do not examine what causes failure, but, rather, how movement members respond to it when it does. Through my interviews with gun

violence prevention advocates, I consider how they see their political opportunities and strategies—not what is actually possible, or what should be done. While examining the political context that affects the real possibilities for action for movement participants is important, understanding how perceptions of reality and the ability to imagine alternative futures affects those very same structures is the other side of the coin.

2. Repertoires of Strategies, 'Stocks of Legacies,' and the Possibilities in Failure

- 6 Political contention that activates collective action does not always lead to social movements. According to the definition by Tilly and Tarrow, social movements form when there are public campaigns of claims-making that include public performances of both the claims and unity between members as well as organizations and networks that sustain these campaigns.¹⁵ Indeed, in the early 2000s, scholars were debating whether a movement for gun violence prevention, or gun control as it was then called, even existed.¹⁶ Collective action by gun control advocates then mostly lacked public performances of claims and unity between members. The Million Mom March in 2000, which gathered according to some estimates over 750,000 protestors in Washington, D.C., had shown promise.¹⁷ However, it was only a year later when the organization formed by the marchers was merged, due to declining membership and threat of bankruptcy, into the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.¹⁸ The Brady Campaign was the oldest national gun violence prevention organization and as such, it had a presence in Washington, D.C. and the capacity and organizational structure to adopt the volunteers of the Million Mom March.
- 7 Non-profit organizations like the Brady Campaign that were focused on advocating for gun control policies had existed before the Million Mom March for decades. Sarah Brady, the wife of Jim Brady, the White House Press Secretary who was shot in a botched assassination attempt at President Reagan, chaired the organization from 1989 to 2015.¹⁹ The Brady Campaign, which had been known as the National Council to Control Handguns before the leadership change, consisted mostly of highly educated professionals.²⁰ They found success in lobbying to pass the most significant pieces of gun legislation in the late 1990s—the Brady Bill (1993) that mandated background checks in federal handgun purchases and the Federal Assault Weapons Ban (1994) that prohibited the manufacturing and possession of assault weapons for the next ten years.²¹ Brady, with its history of petitioning Congress and successful lobbying tactics, was a significant part of the network of organizations upon which the grassroots movement was built.
- 8 Public performances of claims and unity between members in a way that was recognized as a movement happened only after the large-scale grassroots mobilization motivated by the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012. With twenty-six people murdered, twenty of whom were between 6 and 7 years old, the Sandy Hook shooting was the deadliest primary school shooting in the United States.²² The tragedy of Sandy Hook activated an unprecedented number of advocates and led to the formation of organizations such as Moms Demand Action. When Moms Demand Action merged with Mayors Against Illegal Guns, an organization co-founded by the then-New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and formed Everytown for Gun Safety, it became arguably the largest, most well-funded gun violence prevention organization in the

country.²³ Moms Demand Action and Everytown brought together an influx of new people and new networks into the field of gun violence prevention. However, the organizational structures within which day-to-day actions took place relied on the repertoires of strategies that had been accumulated through decades of gun control advocacy. Repertoires of strategies are the "historically constrained set of available options" for collective actors that have cumulated through a process of intentional and unintentional evaluation of past experiences and strategies.²⁴ These repertoires of strategies are built upon what Rossi defines as a stock of legacies, a socialized understanding of past struggles that "enrich or impoverish" the range of strategies collective actors believe are possible.²⁵

- 9 For most of the twentieth century, the gun control movement consisted of organizations such as the Brady Campaign that were primarily focused on passing national gun control legislation.²⁶ Advocates believed setting certain restrictions on access to guns was the most effective way to curtail gun violence. However, for gun control policy to be effective, national legislation would need to curtail interstate traffic, and therefore, it needed to be prioritized. Goss has called this the 'national-rational' approach.²⁷ Furthermore, without mass mobilization and generous donors, national organizations did not have the resources to support local action.²⁸ In the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting, the number of new volunteers and the money donated by wealthy individuals such as Bloomberg meant that it was possible to focus on lobbying for local legislation. Even with this shift, passing federal gun control legislation remained the main goal for the movement. In particular, passing a federal bill on background checks that would have extended the 1993 Brady Bill was one of the primary goals. When the Manchin-Toomey Amendment that would have done just that failed, so did many of the hopes of both new and old members.
- 10 I argue that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and the subsequent failures to pass federal legislation are part of the stock of legacies of the gun violence prevention movement. In the movement, this can be described as the familiar pattern of collective experiences of rage and grief that result from mass shootings, followed by efforts to make policy claims to government actors, and then extreme frustration when these claims are not received. These experiences of failure to pass legislation after mass shootings both on the federal and the local level have accumulated a sense of political impossibility and winnowing down of opportunities. However, it is in this space, between not-success and not complete failure either, where Haiven and Khasnabish suggest that there is room for "pluralizing the horizons of thought."²⁹ They call it "dwelling in the hiatus," the place in between not-failure and not-success, where the everyday work of movements happen, and where movement members learn to not only imagine another world but to live in the world that is not yet there.³⁰
- 11 I show how failures with gun control have become a place of possibility in the gun violence prevention movement—a way to expand and transform the perceptions of the repertoires of strategies available to members in the movement. The broader repertoires of strategies suggested here are not new to gun violence prevention movements across the globe. In countries such as Australia and the UK, there are a multitude of examples of survivors of mass shootings focusing their efforts on care programs and community violence prevention.³¹ The strategies are not new in the movement in the United States either, as actors such as medical professionals and criminal justice organizations have been advocating for measures that address the root

causes of gun violence for decades.³² I argue, however, that there has been a fundamental change in the movement, where these strategies have been adopted much more broadly as gun control has lost its status as the panacea it once was.

- 12 Furthermore, sometimes failure is necessary to avoid reproducing the conditions against which a movement is fighting. Halberstam claims that far too often, success in a heteronormative, capitalist society means upholding oppressive structures, while what they call “the queer art of failure” can offer more creative and cooperative ways to exist.³³ The gun violence prevention movement has also had to contend with how some of their repertoires of strategies have not answered the needs of those most affected. On the contrary, particularly some of the gun control policies the movement has advocated for have deepened rifts with those communities. This includes advocating for policies that are ‘tough on crime’ which, for example, set high penalties for firearm possession or heavily rely on community policing.³⁴ However, the gun violence prevention movement has been profoundly influenced by racial justice movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement of the 2010s.³⁵ In the aftermath of this era, most movement members were forced to reconsider the role of gun control in their advocacy. Moreover, scholars who have studied the movement have found the focus on crime reduction and the framing of gun violence as a public health concern not always persuasive,³⁶ insufficient in addressing the scale of the problem and its political realities,³⁷ and perpetuating epistemic violence.³⁸ Failing, and failing repeatedly, offers space for re-evaluation.

3. Interviews with Gun Violence Prevention Advocates

- 13 During a nine-month period of fieldwork in the United States between 2021 and 2022, I interviewed thirty activists involved in advocating for gun reform or gun violence prevention measures. These activists came from diverse positions. Some worked in leadership positions in large gun violence prevention organizations, some volunteered in local chapters with perhaps only three other members, while some preferred to advocate for change in online spaces. Most of them worked on the very local level or were focused on state legislation. None of my interviewees were focused entirely on national legislation. I found my participants through a snowball method of interviewees recommending their friends, coworkers, and co-volunteers to me. This led to a set of primarily white, well-educated, middle-aged participants, although six of my interviewees were younger than thirty, four were Black, one was Latinx, and one was Asian American. Most of the interviews lasted a little over an hour, but two were over three hours long. Sixteen of the participants lived in states with majority Democratic legislatures, fourteen in states with Republican-led legislatures and one worked in a state where the legislature was divided between the parties. The participants came from fourteen different states. In terms of their everyday advocacy work, they sometimes seemed to live in completely different countries. The participants were motivated by personal stories of victimization, by the loss of their loved ones, their neighbors, or colleagues, by the stories they encountered in the news, and by the fear they felt for their children exposed to the risk of school shootings every single day. Equipped with a framework of a semi-structured interview and a set of questions, I mostly let the participants talk about their experiences of advocacy and what it had

meant to them, emphasizing what Heyl describes as ethnographic interviewing where the goal is to "know what you know in the way that you know it."³⁹

- 14 While the actions they engaged in, what they considered meaningful work, what their goals were, and what they hoped for the future varied as much as the interviewees, some common themes emerged. One way or another, most of the participants had experienced failure with gun control policies. For the participants who lived in states with Republican-majority legislatures, the job was to fight against what they saw as bad policy instead of advocating for something they believed in themselves. The participants who had been involved in successfully advocating for gun control policies on a local level still felt acutely the failures to pass federal legislation. Most of the participants, who had experienced success in passing gun control policies, had concluded that such policies were not enough to answer the scale of the problem they were trying to solve. The experiences of failure were not always personal, but collective to people in the movement.
- 15 Moments such as the inability to pass federal legislation after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting or the reckoning brought on by the Black Lives Matter protests and criminal justice organizers formed the stock of legacy for the movement. The stock of legacy informs the understanding activists have about their political context in which opportunities are either seen or not seen. Experiences of failure can lead activists to understand their political context as closed, which then can drive activist burnout. It can also lead to activists attempting to compromise or moderate their goals in a way that is often felt as an unsatisfactory, but pragmatic, necessary evil. In the case of gun violence prevention advocacy, I argue that the new strategies being diffused in the movement are not compromise solutions guaranteed to fall short of the movement's goals. After failure, advocates have found not only new solutions while rediscovering meaning and joy in their work; they have also found more comprehensive, creative, and ambitious approaches to gun violence.

4. Finding New Meaning in Community Building

4.1. Preventing Violence through Resource Distribution and Social Services

They're starting to see that focusing on systems and being upstream and letting go of this like we need to take on the NRA and the gun lobby and legislation. Let it go, let it go. Or overturning the Second Amendment, let it go. You know, people are dying in Black and Brown communities across the country. Gun owners are dying with guns from their own hands. So, let's start talking about different ways to work with these folks so we can save lives if that's what we're really trying to do.⁴⁰

- 16 Maxwell worked in a leadership position in a nongovernmental organization that sought to fund community-based gun violence prevention programs in a state that had a Democratic-led legislature and, subsequently, some of the strictest gun control laws in the country. Maxwell had been organizing in the movement for over two decades in both local and national organizations. He was involved in the failed efforts to pass federal gun control legislation throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Maxwell described how difficult it was to advocate for gun control at the beginning of the twenty-first century due to the political environment in Washington, D.C. First, the Democratic Party lost control of Congress in the aftermath of passing the 1994 Federal Assault Weapons Ban,

a loss blamed in part on the unpopularity of the policy. Furthermore, Vice President Al Gore's defeat in the 2000 Presidential Election to the Republican candidate George W. Bush, and the 9/11 terrorist attack fundamentally changed the White House and Congress into much more hawkish institutions. Consequently, as no federal gun control legislation was passed, Maxwell believed that if he was still focused on such lobbying efforts, he would have burned out and given up. Instead, these failures made him believe that not only was there another way to address gun violence, but that that approach was better. He turned his attention to his own state and began to advocate for community violence prevention programs.

- 17 Focusing on community violence prevention programs has become a significant approach within the movement. At the core of the approach is the belief that gun violence is a structural problem that is felt most acutely in poor communities, often of color. As such, gun violence is caused by the same structures that keep these communities impoverished. It is an issue of multiple, intertwined problems that are interconnected at a societal level. These structural conditions are seen as the root of all types of gun violence, from suicides to interpersonal violence, domestic violence, and mass shootings. Addressing them as separate issues does not effectively prevent gun violence. Instead, gun violence should be addressed through the same measures that address the overall wellbeing of a community. Willa, a former leader of a local chapter of a prominent national organization in a Democratic-led state, defined the issue in the following way:

When you think about root causes of violence, root causes are things like poverty and lack of good role models, and lack of access to healthy food and safety, and a lot of things that we started to see in common with Muslim groups that were meeting in the community and LGBT groups that were meeting in the community.⁴¹

- 18 Willa, a schoolteacher, became a vocal gun violence prevention activist in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting and officially joined an advocacy organization after the Pulse gay nightclub shooting in 2016 in Orlando, Florida. After the Sandy Hook shooting, local organizations had increased exponentially across the country, which offered her opportunities to advocate for gun control at her own community.⁴² She started her journey believing gun violence was primarily about gang violence and school shootings. However, her beliefs changed when she started reaching out and working together with other local groups, knocking on doors with faith leaders, police officers, and other community groups, and talking to survivors of gun violence in her community. As she experienced broader conversations about racial awareness in her own advocacy, she came to understand gun control policies as ineffective and unresponsive to the needs of her community. Thus, she shifted her focus on such efforts as raising money to hand out basic supplies in her community or creating recreation centers for young people.
- 19 Gabrielle, a leader in a state-based gun violence prevention organization, became an advocate for gun violence prevention in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. She, like many others, came into the movement thinking implementing gun control legislation was the obvious solution that would be easily achievable due to the commonsense nature of the policies. After a decade of fighting against policies that expand gun rights in a state with a Republican-majority legislature—fights that were ultimately lost—she began to seek other ways to effect change. Her focus shifted to finding local groups to work together with such as the veteran community and suicide prevention groups. She wanted to help cities create violence

prevention offices that could do community outreach. She began meeting with groups that did street outreach and hospital-based violence intervention to stop cycles of retaliation. In this work, she found experiences of success:

I am willing to take very small successes until we can have bigger ones and the small successes are not unimportant. It's important that people realize the full breadth of gun violence prevention and that even if it's exciting to talk about passing great bills, it's also extremely important to talk about community initiatives and things like that.⁴³

- 20 Young people came into the movement particularly after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida and the March For Our Lives protests in 2018 carrying both generationally-specific experiences built around school shootings and a sense of collective failure that had led them to believe something needed to be done differently.⁴⁴ Micah, a 20-year-old gun violence prevention activist who worked both with local groups in a Republican-led state and was in a leadership position in a national organization, began organizing when he was fourteen after losing a friend to gun violence. Clara, an 18-year-old advocate living in another conservative state, became involved in gun violence prevention organizing after a shooting in her high school. George, a 29-year-old community organizer in a Democratic-led state, was motivated to work on the issue after his family had been directly impacted by gun violence. All three youth of color came into the movement with lived experiences of gun violence and a clear understanding of the problem as a structural issue that was about more than the guns. For them, gun violence advocacy was very concretely about how to help their communities in the present to survive from one day to the next. They did this by distributing basic resources such as food, clothing, hygiene products, and school supplies. Gun violence prevention was also about advocating for policies and practices that recognized the underlying trauma that caused gun violence survivors to become gun violence perpetrators. George described the multitude of ways they attempted to help families that had experienced gun violence that illustrated the breadth of the problem:

So whether that is navigating them through the victim compensation program, where they can get money to pay for their hospital bills or mental health care, or making sure that they can have transportation to their next appointment, or providing a bill of services, or providing relocation services cause they no longer feel safe in their own home because they were just attacked.⁴⁵

- 21 Community building by advocating for violence prevention through social services and being involved in redistributing basic resources that addressed the mental and physical wellbeing of people represented a shift from the gun control work done before. Historically, the gun violence prevention movement was made up of mostly white, middle-class professionals, and gun control was initially framed as an issue of crime control.⁴⁶ The so-called 'tough on crime' policies that focused on preventing crime through punitive measures mostly failed in reducing crime and instead incarcerated generations of particularly Black Americans.⁴⁷ The Federal Assault Weapons Ban was part of the Crime bill of 1994 that drove mass incarceration through federal funding incentives.⁴⁸ Thus, when it comes to preventing gun violence in poor Black communities, it has not been traditionally addressed by the gun reform movement, but by organizations and activists fighting for criminal justice reform.
- 22 For Wakil, Harold, and Shaun—mentors in a restorative justice program where credible messengers such as formerly incarcerated men offered guidance and practical help for

at-risk youth and their families—the focus was on what causes violence, not how the violence is perpetuated. They described how growing up in a violent neighborhood drove young men in particular to seek protection from guns, and how possession charges became the first step for them in a perpetual cycle of incarceration. They argued that knowing that acquiring unregistered guns was illegal did not deter those with chronic fear for their safety, and it would not stop those released from prison from becoming repeat offenders. Wakil recounted how, for him, unlearning the need for a gun could only happen when he surrounded himself with people he could trust. He attempted to offer that same for the youth in his program and through the trust he had gained, he was able to support them in managing the difficulties of everyday life after incarceration. He attended probation meetings with his clients, helped them seek housing, education and employment, and led workshops on de-escalation tactics and other life skills. In the process, he taught his clients how to feel safer without a gun.

- 23 It is these types of efforts of long-term, grassroots community building that gun reform advocates such as Maxwell, Willa, and Gabrielle also turned towards after pursuing gun control policies had one way or another failed them. Together, these strategies aimed at community building have changed understanding in the movement about gun violence as an issue as well as its solutions to something broader than gun policy. Centering community building and local violence prevention programs also allowed the advocates to avoid the rationality problem that had been present with gun control legislation. The movement was focused on national gun control legislation because it was a *rational* calculation about the effectiveness of the policy—local and state-level gun control legislation are necessarily hampered by how easy it is to drive across state lines to acquire a gun. On the contrary, community violence programs and community building can only happen on a very local level. National efforts, such as the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act that President Biden signed into law in 2022, are meaningful, but not imperative, for the approach to work.⁴⁹ Local action and community building are essential to efforts to build political power that Metzl considers to be lacking from the gun violence prevention movement and the public health-based, non-political, gun safety measures they have been focused on for most of the twenty-first century thus far.⁵⁰

4.2. Consciousness Raising in the Absence of Opportunities

- 24 Particularly in states where the opportunities for legislative change appeared more closed than ever, advocates turned to community building through consciousness raising. Harriet, a faith leader in a state that had been led by the Republican Party for more than two decades, became a gun violence prevention activist in the 1990s after a stranger murdered her family member with an assault rifle. She connected with a national gun violence prevention organization and established a local organization to try and keep the Federal Assault Weapons Ban of 1994 from expiring. She participated in local TV and radio public service campaigns that advocated safe storage and strengthening gun laws. She debated the NRA and other gun rights groups whenever there was a mass shooting. However, after more than a decade of fighting in a conservative state, that became an untenable road:

We've been prevented from moving any major legislation for a long time. [...] we had to figure out well then what else can we do if we can't knock down the wall at the state legislature. So then that's really about changing social norms and talk

about how we talk about it and building consensus and coming at it from a more intersectional point of view.⁵¹

- 25 For Harriet, this meant focusing her energy on working together with different community groups such as different faith leaders, domestic violence groups, or Latinx groups. She was most involved in leading civil dialogue workshops and facilitating conversations with diverse groups on their attitudes toward guns, different gun policies, and solutions to gun violence. She found the most meaning and joy in leading the workshops as well as mentoring young activists such as the March For Our Lives advocates in her long career as a gun violence prevention organizer. Continuing that work was what kept her motivated:

I don't use that type of legislative thing as any type of success metric anymore. I guess that's how I stay motivated, cause if I only did that, it would be like, all right, let's just pack up and I'll go home.⁵²

- 26 Sometimes gathering people to talk about gun violence, to share their experiences and knowledge, and to give people a voice and a sense that they were not alone, was the only meaningful thing that advocates felt they could do. Farrah, a volunteer in a state where Republicans had a supermajority in both chambers, felt both that gun laws needed to change to make an impact and that they would not change in her state. At this impasse, she found the most meaning in bringing people together to make new alliances, to keep them informed, and, through that unity, to show that there were people in the state that did not agree on the direction of the legislature:

I felt like we were getting good information out to our community and trying to identify people that are perhaps not obvious allies for gun violence prevention but they're definitely communities that have that perspective and share the goal. So trying to get people connected to present a unified front to lawmakers so they don't write or pass these crazy bills.⁵³

- 27 She did not believe things would change in her state, but she thought maybe change could happen on the federal level. The future of the country was a tossup in her mind, but she was still "straddling hope up the air."⁵⁴ Hers is a similar story to that of Holly, a leader in a local chapter of a national gun violence prevention organization in another conservative state with a Republican supermajority in both chambers of the legislature. To Holly, too, it was important to advocate for what she called data-driven solutions, as one would when treating a disease such as cancer. However, in a state where the opportunities were closed for gun control policies, she began focusing on bringing people in to have conversations with them about gun violence through avenues such as mailing lists and open forums with neutral moderators. For her, the most meaningful thing she thought she had done was to deliver the legislature a thousand printed comments from people asking for stricter gun policies: "I just, I just felt like, you know, for a minute those voices got heard and that's important in a time when everybody's in their silo listening to themselves."⁵⁵

- 28 Consciousness raising could also be a form of community building directed towards the movement itself. Harry, an organizer from a conservative state with a Republican supermajority legislature, believed that the gun violence prevention movement should focus on advocating for effective, evidence-based, and research-driven policies. He saw his role in the movement best suited to making that research information as easily available to other activists as he could. Through concentrated data archives, policy drafts, and daily newsletters, he attempted to offer tools for others in the movement on persuasive messaging, how to combat misinformation, and knowledge about research

on how different policies worked. In a state with few political opportunities, he found meaning in building the movement and attempting to bring together the different fractured sections he saw in his work.

- 29 Consciousness raising and bringing people together to learn with each other was a lifeline to the activists working in states where they felt that the things that needed to be done were not possible—a source of meaning and comfort in between constant struggle and failure. However, education could also be a source of failure. William, a local leader in a state that had a majority Democratic legislature, but with large rural areas and a thriving hunting culture, was a strong proponent of the public health approach to gun violence. He believed that educating the public about the dangers of guns was the most important thing he could do. However, he had been mostly frustrated by his work and the lack of willingness of people to engage: “I would love to say that as a result of doing these things that you know, I got 100 people to turn their weapons in or guns in. But you know, that hasn’t happened. I can’t say that.”⁵⁶
- 30 Consciousness raising and educating the public about gun violence and the preventive measures gun owners themselves can take has long been the purview of those advocating for the public health approach to gun violence. Education is difficult, however, in an environment where the issue has been politicized and polarized for decades. A message of public health is often insufficient in breaking down the barriers and prejudices held by gun owners or gun rights proponents who consider gun culture to be a way of life.⁵⁷ When there are no concrete results or successes advocates can point to, activism becomes hard to sustain. No matter how success is defined by outsiders, activists themselves have to feel it and believe it for them to continue finding meaning and purpose in their work. Finding new approaches after failure is important precisely because it keeps activists engaged.

5. Direct Action and Everyday Acts of Resistance

5.1. Struggling against Gun Rights Organizations and Right-Wing Extremists

- 31 The powerlessness advocates felt when faced with a legislative body that offered no avenues to try and effect change was sometimes combatted through creative ways to resist ‘the other side’ seen as responsible for gun violence and the continued legislative inaction on the issue. Helen, a faith leader in her community, helped launch an initiative in her conservative state that encouraged churches to become safe surrender sites for weapons. In the Guns to Gardens campaign, community members could voluntarily surrender their guns, which then would be disposed of by dismantling them, and turn them into garden tools such as shovels.⁵⁸ Helen believed one of the biggest problems in solving the issue of gun violence was the number of guns already in the country, made worse by the fact firearms are non-consumable products that remain in circulation for decades. In the face of inaction by elected officials, the Guns to Gardens campaign offered people a way to do something—to resist—in their own everyday lives:

You know these churches have been doing activism for a while but still feel helpless, and so what the Guns to Gardens campaign does is it gives people, it empowers them. It helps them feel like even though legislators are doing nothing,

lawmakers are doing nothing, we as people have some power and can do something.⁵⁹

- 32 Michal Spocko, who wanted me to use his pseudonym when writing about his advocacy, was a longtime activist from a liberal state who initially found success in the early 2000s by taking action against right-wing extremists glorifying guns and using violent rhetoric on radio talk shows. He would anonymously, from a protected email address, send advertisers clips of violent speeches, questioning their support for such rhetoric. In some cases, he saw success with advertisers threatening to pull their ads from the shows if the rhetoric continued, and the radio hosts fired when they did not comply. From this experience, he learned to look for financial leverage to use against right-wing extremists, legislators attempting to pass laws extending gun rights, and gun lobbyists. He talked to advertisers, business owners, school boards, and their insurance carriers about the risks firearms posed and what they might be liable for if something went wrong on their premises:

I called it the Spocko method. And I kind of codified it. And I said, here's how this works and here's, you know, here's the leverage point. Here's how you talk to advertisers, here's the issues that they care about, here's how to protect yourself.⁶⁰

- 33 Struggling against gun rights advocates, extremists, and trolls online was one way some of the activists felt they could best put their talents to use to resist what they believed was the insanity they saw in the world. Myles and Saul shared a similar story. They were both from states with a Democratic supermajority in both chambers of the legislature, both were writers professionally, and both got the final push to join the movement due to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. Myles started by writing articles about how to stop gun violence through gun control while Saul started by debating with gun rights advocates on social media. They both received a tidal wave of vitriol, hate, and death threats to them and their families for their efforts. They worked in and with the social media platforms of multiple organizations. They were disillusioned and frustrated by their experiences and had very little sense of success. Yet, they still found meaning in memeing and writing about what was commonsense to them. It was a way to make sense of the world and find peace in 'doing something':

There's nothing else, I can just work on changing the culture. It's like, you know, the termites will bring down a house, but it takes up a long time. And so, I see myself as kind of like a termite, you know? [...] Eventually, something's gonna have to change, you know?⁶¹

- 34 Online activism presented a low-cost option for participation to those who felt compelled to do something. The gun violence prevention movement has always faced the so-called 'free rider' problem that is inherent to the gun control policy solution. Even as a majority of the U.S. public supports gun control measures, they are not nearly as mobilized to take action on the issue as gun rights supporters are, as the benefits of dedicating time and resources are not immediately apparent.⁶² Furthermore, gun control is a social regulatory policy that researchers see as particularly difficult to accrue support for in a culture built on the idea of individualistic freedoms.⁶³ The reasons people decide to dedicate time to activism and civic action are complex and include individual, cultural, and structural considerations. Lowering the threshold of participation is part of those considerations, and for some, online activism offers a choice between activism and non-participation. While online activism does not directly translate to other types of political participation, nor is it unproblematically

empowering to activists, there is enough evidence to show that social movements can use social media to increase public awareness and offline engagement.⁶⁴

- 35 Protest marches have not been a significant part of the repertoire of strategies in the gun violence prevention movement as historically, the movement has been relatively small-scale and focused on lobbying lawmakers, which in turn required sustaining good relationships with them. There are two significant exceptions to this rule. First is the Million Mom March, which was organized in 2000 by women who were outraged by inaction in Congress after a wave of mass shootings such as the 1999 Columbine shooting.⁶⁵ Eighteen years later, young people marched to Washington, D.C. on the same business. After the Parkland school shooting in 2018, the March For Our Lives protests gathered over a million people together to demand change, making it one of the largest protests in the history of the United States. These two moments were integral to movement building. The Million Mom March was the first time there had been any significant grassroots movement around gun violence prevention. The March For Our Lives movement brought young people and their understanding of gun violence prevention into the movement. These moments represented a groundswell of support for the cause and an undeniable sense of hope that true change was finally possible. What is less spoken of is what happens then when that change does not come.
- 36 Lesley was part of a gun violence prevention organization in a rural state with a Republican supermajority in the legislature when she was 15. After the Parkland shooting, she was part of organizing the March For Our Lives march that became one of the largest protests in the history of her state.⁶⁶ She described the sense of hope the march gave her and how she believed federal universal background checks and an assault rifle ban could be achieved. When that did not happen, she felt disillusioned. Ultimately, she stopped working in the field of gun violence prevention:

I don't think I thought that there would be a march and things would change. I knew it was going to require like a sustained political action. But I think the big hope is that you know the NRA would, there would be a NRA take down a little bit, and that that would help because that felt like the big boogiemer standing in the way. Now the NRA has been like weakened so much and there still has been so little movement that it's, even that feels a little, I don't know. [...] Like, I don't wanna be pessimistic but it didn't work and it hasn't continued.⁶⁷

- 37 This sentiment was there two decades earlier as well. Maxwell was part of organizing the Million Mom marchers after the protest. He described the seemingly impossible task of managing expectations: "Because what happens is people, you know. I did my thing. I went to D.C. with my kids. I slept on the ground and did all this stuff. And now, we're going to win. [...] It was a shit show."⁶⁸ Large protest marches are powerful tools for movement building. They show strength and unity between members and as such, often infuse the movement with hope for change. However, when political realities do not change, they can come to represent an even greater experience of failure for organizers and movement participants. How that sense of failure is navigated—or, indeed, if it is at all addressed—is integral to the continuation of the movement.

5.2. Disrupting the Movement Narrative of Commonsense Laws

- 38 Failure and unresolved tension over strategies and goals have also disrupted internal negotiations in the movement. One familiar debate was over how much the movement should appeal to the so-called middle—to gun owners, to Republicans, and to rural

conservatives— with the hope that some of them would be convinced by the rhetoric of commonsense laws. Gillian was an advocate from a state with a Republican-majority legislature. She had found some success in passing gun control laws. Yet, she had felt entirely hampered by the demands of the organizations she had been volunteering for to moderate her language. What started as enormous frustration over what and how she could tell her story when trying to advocate for gun control policies in the state legislature, grew into a larger critique of the whole movement:

The language of the gun control movement was so absurdly milquetoast, right? Like, it was almost required that if you said anything to indicate you want gun control, first of all, you're never, ever allowed to say gun control. [...] I'm like, fuck that. Why? Why does everyone have to genuflect to the gun industry to ask politely for something to change, you know? And of course we're losing.⁶⁹

39 Gillian was part of starting a new organization to escape the confinement she felt she had been put into. Together with a group of people who shared her sentiments, she formed an underground feminist movement against gun culture, fascism, and what they called Trump culture. The repertoire of strategies of this group differed drastically from the rest of the movement. They focused on agitating for change through non-violent civil disobedience, direct action campaigns, and creative acts of sabotage. The group was leaderless and decentralized with the idea that anyone who wished to participate could do so in any manner they wanted. Their tactics included producing and disseminating mailers, flyers, stickers, and buttons with messages such as "fuck your guns" and "fuck the NRA," frequent protesting at public events but also in front of the homes of various NRA members, and vandalism targeted at those same people.

40 The group was explicitly feminist, and much of the material they produced centered on critiquing the toxic masculinity they saw inherent to gun culture as well as drawing agency and empowerment from a collective feminist identity. Gillian described it as using "feminist rage."⁷⁰ The feminist identity the group adopted also stood in sharp contrast to the motherist politics characterized by the Million Mom March and Moms Demand Action. In the gun violence prevention movement, motherhood has always been the primary vehicle to bridging the gender gap—which is the fact that women support gun control measures in far greater numbers than men but politically organize around the issue far less than pro-gun men.⁷¹ Politicized motherhood often leans into the notion of mothers as naturally peaceful caretakers of all children, who are not only justified, but also morally obligated to participate in the political arena because of their social responsibility.⁷² The feminist gun control group saw the combative stance of their actions as providing something different to the movement, where the polite and moderating tone of organizations such as Moms Demand Action was seen as the norm.

41 Hailey, an advocate from a conservative state with few legislative opportunities, was also part of organizing the underground feminist group. Before, she had been one of the moderators of another online group that had been trolling gun rights activists on social media. She, like others in these groups, felt that what the gun violence prevention movement lacked was a left flank that would fight the extremism of the gun rights organizations:

Our idea was that we needed something at this other extreme to help pull things back to the center because the NRA and all these other groups have been pulling things to the right so far that a lot of these things seem normal that shouldn't seem normal at all. You know like open carry like in what universe is that normal but

they've pulled us so far to this side that people are willing to accommodate that in order to get little concessions.⁷³

42 For Hailey, making memes, trolling, creating a community for people to feel safe and organize, and a space to do something even from home was the most meaningful part of her activism. The direct action campaigns these underground groups undertook were polarizing. Although anonymous, the accounts and social media platforms of the groups received hate and death threats from gun rights advocates as well as harsh criticism from members of some of the larger gun violence prevention organizations. Both Hailey and Gillian said that they were able to deal with the backlash because of the community they had created and the fun they had while engaging in their actions. Joy felt like a win in a movement that mostly dealt with sadness, death, and failure.

43 Emily, another longtime advocate in a state with a Republican-led legislature and a participant in the underground feminist group said that she wanted to resist the gun lobby by fighting "absurdity with absurdity."⁷⁴ This included going topless to open carry events to shock and distract news media, chalking profanities and dirty limericks on the steps of the capitol, and handing out dildos to people at a campus carry protest. She wanted to "stir the pot" and attract young people to the movement with fun protest stunts. For her, like for Gillian and Hailey, the specific long-term goals of the movement were less consequential. Rather, the point was to do something different to change the context of where the debates over guns were being fought. Emily wrote "melt the guns" on the ground with chalk but when asked, she said she wanted "sensible gun laws like background checks."⁷⁵

44 Others too found themselves frustrated with the language policing of some of the national organizations. Riley, a gun violence survivor herself, who lived and had lived most of her life in Democratic-led states, described the implosion of a survivor network of a national organization over debates about language and lack of respect:

It started to feel a little stifling and offensive as a gun violence survivor to be policed about how I'm going to talk about my story and the way that I want to talk about guns. [...] I think it's a very watered down and weak approach frankly as far as I'm concerned. I mean, of course, you know, everybody thinks any form of gun control or gun reform is going to be radical.⁷⁶

45 Longtime activist Olivia, who had been involved in a liberal state since the Million Mom March, and whose primary form of advocacy had been lobbying for gun control legislation, had also found that the middle-ground approach did not work anymore. Disappointed by both parties in her state, she said:

One of the biggest things too is that back in the day, you know, we heard it time and again that as gun violence prevention advocates, we needed to be polite. And we are sick of that. Nobody wants to be polite anymore because it doesn't do us any good.⁷⁷

46 These types of tensions often are unsolvable. Breakdown and fragmentation become unavoidable. Yet, in these failures to compromise and settle into a coherent approach and narrative exist a multitude of possibilities. When asked if they thought the movement had changed during the time they had been advocates, almost all of my interviewees said that they thought that public conversation around the issue had become more open and honest. For the activists themselves, the breakdown was necessary for them to continue with the work, and to find meaning and joy in it. Riley left the group that she had been part of and became a speaker for multiple organizations that welcomed her telling her story the way she wanted to tell it. Gillian and Hailey eventually burned out on the activism but still kept writing about the issue

on social media. The friends they made during their most active years, “friendships from the trenches,” as Gillian described them,⁷⁸ were still integral to their lives. The impact of the direct action campaigns they did is impossible to quantify. However, they did have a significant impact on the people and the relationships that formed the movement. The networks that make up a social movement are the roots for further organizing in spaces where there might have been no action before. The role of underground groups in growing those roots in a way that allowed for more freedom was integral.

6. Exploring the Counterfactuals: The Case for Colorado and Gun Control

- 47 Amid experiences of failure, closure of opportunities, and new strategies, one exception emerged in my interviews. Columbine High School in Colorado was the site of the first school shooting in the modern age, and while the consequences of the shooting reverberated across the country, it set Colorado in a very particular trajectory.⁷⁹ In the aftermath, activists organized to lobby for the closing of the gun show loophole that had allowed the Columbine shooters to purchase their weapons. While that bill failed then, the organizing led to some electoral wins and, most importantly, sustained activism. The Aurora Theater shooting in Colorado in July 2012 likewise opened an opportunity for the organizers to begin negotiating over gun reform bills with the governor of Colorado, who was supportive but noncommittal.⁸⁰ The Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in December of the same year became the tipping point. Three gun control bills passed the legislature in 2013, including the first of many that strengthened background checks as well as restricted ammunitions.⁸¹ Activists kept lobbying the legislature successfully in the following years. In 2024, eight new gun control bills became law.⁸²
- 48 These experiences of success kept activists in Colorado on the same path—chipping away at the state legislature’s resistance to gun control policies and finding political opportunities for their advocacy slowly but surely cracking open. The focus and strategies of Colorado advocates did not change because there were always more bills to advocate for and reasons to believe they would be successful in their efforts. The politics of guns changed in Colorado in part because the series of high-profile mass shootings mobilized long-term activism at the same time that the state was experiencing demographic shifts that were favorable to Democrats, allowing for electoral wins for those who were open to gun reforms. Colorado is certainly not the only state where gun reforms have been successfully passed into law and not the only one where they have been passed in reaction to mass shootings. However, in states like California, where gun legislation is the strictest in the country, activists have still turned to other strategies after finding gun control policies as insufficient to answer the breadth of the problem. Despite the successes in Colorado, the activists I interviewed experienced similar frustrations as the ones organizing in states with no legislative opportunities. Their overall sense of the future was bleak. Ultimately, local-level legislation cannot solve national problems, not only in actuality, but also in how the activists understand their success and what they imagine is possible in the future.

7. Conclusion

- 49 In this article, I have examined how gun violence prevention activists in the United States have understood and experienced possibilities for change in their political context. I considered the failure to pass the Manchin-Toomey Amendment in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012 to be part of the movement's stock of legacy, endemic to a larger sense of closed political opportunities. Likewise, racial justice movements such as the Black Lives Matter protests of the 2010s and 2020s as a stock of legacy represented a place of re-evaluation of strategies for the gun violence prevention movement. These collective experiences, together with unsuccessful personal experiences in attempting to pass gun control legislation either on the local or federal level, intermingled to create a sense of failure, stuckness, and closure of opportunities for the movement in the current political environment. Mass mobilization that followed the Sandy Hook shooting and wealthy donors allowed for activists to shift their focus to state-level legislation. Yet, even in states where activists had found success with gun control legislation, the imagined future was not particularly hopeful. Frustrations of living in the in-between state of an imagined commonsense future and experienced absurdity of the current present spilled into internal tensions and fracturing of the movement.
- 50 I have argued that instead of activist burnout, complete breakdown of the movement, or moderating goals to respond to an imagined threshold of acceptability, these failures have led to the construction of new repertoires of strategies that are more comprehensive and ambitious. Firstly, several types of efforts to find meaning in community building have emerged. When gun violence was understood as a structural issue that at its root had insecurity caused by widespread poverty and lack of opportunities, measures such as resource distribution and increased access to social services became the key to prevention. Another side of community building was to keep bringing members together to discuss the issues that affected them. Consciousness raising was a particularly important strategy for advocates in states where opportunities to successfully make claims in the legislature were seen entirely closed. Focusing on community building allowed activists to center local action, build political power, and circumvent the federal policy problem that lay at the heart of the gun control approach.
- 51 Secondly, some gun violence prevention advocates focused their attention on direct action and resisting the 'status quo' or the 'other side' in their everyday lives. Struggling against gun manufacturers, gun rights organizations, and right-wing extremists happened both online and offline, through measures that came most naturally to the participants. Some applied their talents as writers and proclivities towards debating to try and slowly change attitudes and culture through conversations and fights with gun rights advocates on social media. Others took the fight to ad buyers and insurance companies, using financial leverage to effect change. Some found concrete measures to lower gun deaths one gun at a time. Churches and faith leaders as trusted community members offered space for safe weapon surrender. Advocates used these strategies because they believed that something needed to change culturally before policy could change either on the local or federal level. New repertoires of strategies in the movement were also adopted due to internal tensions and

disagreements in the movement. Direct action was taken to change culture not only outside the movement, but within it as well.

- 52 Failure carries with it mostly negative connotations. When social movements fail, the focus often turns to the reasons why it happened. Studies have found explanations from external conditions such as government repression⁸³ to better financed and organized opposition.⁸⁴ Failure can also be seen to have been caused by ineffective strategies⁸⁵ or a breakdown over the collective identities of a movement.⁸⁶ I have considered what comes after failure and what kinds of possibilities it can offer to social movements. If success reproduces oppression, like in the case of some gun control policies,⁸⁷ failure is necessary in the search for more equitable solutions. For the gun violence prevention movement, "dwelling in the hiatus"⁸⁸ meant constructing new repertoires of strategies from ones focused on changing federal government policy to ones focused on local action and changing attitudes, lived experiences, and cultures around them. Consequently, the diversified repertoires of strategies have added more understanding of the issue and more comprehensive and ambitious policy suggestions. Through the interviews I conducted, I learned how experiences of success and failure had affected the way the movement members imagined their political possibilities and strategies they had chosen. More research is still needed to consider the concrete impact these strategies have had on the communities whose lives the gun violence prevention movement aims to better.

NOTES

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ABSTRACTS

After decades of limited action on gun control policies particularly on the federal level, the gun violence prevention movement in the United States has largely failed to reach the goals it had set out for itself. This article examines what has come after that failure. Using in-depth interviews I conducted with gun violence prevention organizers across the country during a nine-month period of fieldwork between 2021 and 2022, I explore the strategies and goals of activists and ask how experiences of success and failure have changed them. I argue that activists have found, after failure, new strategies, creative approaches, and more comprehensive and ambitious solutions to gun violence. Moreover, through repertoires of strategies focused on community building and everyday acts of resistance, gun violence prevention activists have found renewed meaning in their work.

INDEX

Keywords: gun violence prevention, social movements, failure, community building, repertoires of strategies

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