

FRONT PAGE DIALOGUE: **Guns in America**

In the U.S., the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida in February 2018 – and the subsequent nation-wide student-led activism demanding federal gun control reform - has reignited a bitter debate around guns and their place in the lives of Americans. There are more than 300 million firearms in America. On average, 13,000 people lose their lives to gun violence every year in this country¹. Consequently, many people feel that restrictions on gun ownership must be in place for the overall good. For others, however, guns are something they've grown up with - a part of leisure culture, sporting culture, a necessity in some industries, like farming and ranching, and a right protected by the Second Amendment. Perhaps as a reflection of these polarized perspectives, local, state and national gun policies have changed many times over the country's history, oscillating between highly restrictive to highly permissive, with nuanced positions in between.

Across America, people want to live in safe communities and to feel that their children do too, but conversations about guns in America are complex and multifaceted. They touch on an array of topics, including culture, race, domestic abuse, mental illness, firearms education and constitutional scholarship. Facilitating constructive conversations on the role of guns in our society is one way Sites of Conscience can help support communities. Below is one model for engaging visitors in dialogue which we encourage you to adapt and ground in the unique history that your site works to preserve and share.

How to Use Front Page Dialogues

Rather than using all the model questions suggested under each phase, facilitators may select questions that reflect the evolving conversation of the group they are guiding in dialogue. We also anticipate that you will develop new questions ahead of time or during the dialogue to draw on the strengths of your site or respond to the needs of participants.

Guidelines

What are the group agreements or guidelines for the dialogue that help us establish the “container” that the dialogue occurs within? Here are some sample agreements:

1. Use “I” statements. Speak only for yourself.
2. Share the air: leave room for everyone to speak.
3. Own your intentions and your impacts.
4. Controversy with civility.

¹ <https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-by-the-numbers/#DailyDeaths>



Additional Resources:

- <http://news.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx>
- <http://www.newsweek.com/sandy-hook-anniversary-gun-control-laws-failed-747415>

Shared Content:

Timeline of the major gun control laws in America, adapted from: <http://time.com/5169210/us-gun-control-laws-history-timeline/>

1791 - The first ten amendments to the US Constitution are ratified. The second states: "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."

1934/38 – The National Firearms Act, in response to gang activity like the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, imposes a tax on the manufacturing, selling and transporting of some firearms. It also defines a group of people who cannot purchase guns, such as convicted felons, and mandates that gun sellers keep customer records.

1939 – The US Supreme Court rules in *United States v. Miller* that Congress could regulate the interstate selling of a short barrel shotgun, stating that there was no evidence that a sawed off shotgun "has some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well-regulated militia," and thus "we cannot say that the Second Amendment guarantees the right to keep and bear such an instrument."

1967 - Backed by Governor Ronald Reagan and the National Rifle Association – and developed in part as a reaction to the emergence of the Black Panther Party – the Mulford Act restricts the open carry of loaded firearms in California.

1968 - Following the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Gun Control Act of 1968 bans importing guns that have "no sporting purpose," imposes age restrictions on the purchase of handguns (gun owners have to be 21), prohibits felons, the mentally ill, and others from purchasing guns and requires that all manufactured or imported guns have a serial number.

1986 - The Firearm Owners Protection Act is passed by Congress prohibiting a national registry of dealer records, limiting ATF inspections to once per year (unless there are multiple infractions), softening what is defined as "engaging in the business" of selling firearms, and allowing licensed dealers to sell firearms at "gun shows" in their state. It also loosens regulations on the sale and transfer of ammunition.

1993 - The Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act of 1993 requires that background checks be completed before a gun is purchased from a licensed dealer, manufacturer or importer. It also establishes the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS), which is maintained by the FBI.

1994 - Tucked into the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act bans the manufacture of certain semi-automatic firearms for civilian use from September 1994 to September 2004.



2005 - Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act is signed by President George W. Bush to prevent gun manufacturers from being named in federal or state civil suits by those who were victims of crimes involving guns made by that company.

2008 - District of Columbia v. Heller changes a nearly 70-year precedent set by Miller in 1939 by challenging the constitutionality of a 32-year-old handgun ban in Washington, DC, and finding that, "the handgun ban and the trigger-lock requirement (as applied to self-defense) violate the Second Amendment."

2013 – Following the mass shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school, both the Manchin-Toomey Bill which would have required background checks for all gun sales between private dealers, including gun shows and websites and the Assault Weapons Ban, which would have banned certain kinds of semiautomatic weapons, fail to pass Congressional votes.

2018 - More than 100 federal gun control measures have been proposed between 2013 and 2018. All have failed to pass Congressional votes. More than 200 state-level gun laws have been passed.

PHASE I – COMMUNITY BUILDING

Questions in Phase 1 help build the "learning community" by allowing participants to share information about themselves.

Facilitator should welcome the group, introduce themselves, explain their role and the purpose of the dialogue. Facilitator should also ask for agreement to the guidelines established for the group. Facilitator should share copies of the timeline with all participants **OR** using paper, adhere an enlarged version of the timeline to the wall of the dialogue space, allowing for participants to share their answers to the Phase I question by writing on the timeline and then allowing participants time to talk about the moments that others have added.

What is one thing we should know about you to understand your relationship to guns?

This is a timeline of federal policy. Where do you find yourself on this timeline? What would you add to reflect your personal experience?

What other moments need to be added to this timeline?



PHASE II - SHARING OUR OWN EXPERIENCES

Questions in Phase 2 help participants recognize how their experiences are alike and different and why.

What is most misunderstood in the conversation about guns in America?

How have guns impacted your community?

Where do you see guns in your everyday life?

How does your museum interpret guns/weaponry?
What are visitors curious about?

How has America's relationship with guns changed in your life time?

Why does this issue seem particularly resistant to change?

What argument about guns frustrates you?

Do you feel safe? What needs to happen to make you feel safer?

PHASE III - EXPLORING BEYOND OURSELVES

Questions in Phase 3 help participants engage in inquiry and exploration about the dialogue topic in an effort to learn with and from one another.

What parts of this issue are best regulated at the national level, and what is best left to state, local or individual control?

Guns can contribute to our safety and can also endanger it. What promotes the former and reduces the latter?

What is holding this conversation back?

Conversations on gun violence are also conversations about mental illness. How is that connection useful for this conversation, how is it not?

Are all Americans treated equally in their relationship to guns?

What should museums consider in offering firearms programming?



Is our safety best protected by individuals or communities?

How does the focus on the National Rifle Association help this conversation? How does it hold it back?

PHASE IV - SYNTHESIZING THE EXPERIENCE

Questions in Phase 4 help the group to reflect on the dialogue and what they learned.

Where will change come from on this issue?

If we could continue this conversation, what would you want to discuss?

What have you heard that is new or different today? What have you learned?

What do you need to know more about?
How will you learn more?

How will you make your community safer?

Who do you want to continue this conversation with? Why?