Cognitive Radicalization and Gun Violence

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Science

In

Criminal Justice

Youngstown State University

May 2024

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Abstract

U.S. violence, including school shootings and synagogue bombings, is increasing. Perpetrators of violent events often radicalize from violent beliefs to actions. The theory of cognitive radicalization distinguishes between the radicalization to extremist opinions and radicalization built on actions. People who commit mass shootings and bombings are part of the 1% of people who fit at the apex levels of the two-pyramids model of cognitive radicalization.

Observed events of firearm violence throughout the country in media, such as mass shootings, initially produced interest in this study. Analyses of the data revealed that firearm access is significant to violent opinion radicalization; many violent events are related to radical behavior, ideas, or beliefs.

This study analyzes data from the Public Religion Research Institute Social Networks Survey. It investigates associations between firearm accessibility and adherence to violent acts after controlling for sociodemographic factors. The sample population includes 5461 online survey respondents. Frequency tables and binary logistic regression were used for analysis, aiming to provide insights into violence identification, awareness, and prevention. Variables not included in the current study that can be reviewed in the future involve political affiliation, religious belief, and cultural norms.

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Chapter One

Introduction

This thesis is about the relationship between gun ownership and potentially violent ideas, and whether gun ownership should be viewed as an indicator of a security threat within the polarized context of our times. Guns are not regarded here as the cause of violence. However, the advocacy of violence to resolve personal and political grievances must be taken more seriously if the advocates of future violence are also those with weapons that make them capable of delivering on these threats.

Firearm violence is a substantial problem in the United States. Between 2019 and 2022, non-suicide-related firearm deaths rose by 31% and suicides increased by 13% (Figure 1). As of December 15, 41,050 gun-violence deaths had occurred in the U.S. during 2023, a death rate from firearm violence in the U.S. that was approximately 821 people weekly 2023 (Gun Violence Archive, 2024a). While there are peaks and valleys in crime rate, recent years indicate that the great crime decline starting in the mid-1990s has bottomed out and violent crime rates are now experiencing recurring short-term peaks (Statistica Research Department, 2023; Figure 2).

Firearm violence may initially appear to be a consequence of the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which grants citizens the legal right to keep and bear arms (Spitzer, 2017). Given this, one might argue that firearm violence is a simple artifact of a society where gun ownership is routine, that is, the more firearms in circulation, the more likely there would be misfiring and misuse of firearms. If firearms are not present, accidents and attacks will still happen. However, many instances of gun violence do not happen spontaneously or accidentally.

Each act of firearm violence involves a person deciding to use a gun to harm others. This is a qualitative aspect of firearm violence that distinguishes it from other public health issues.

This violence is becoming a burden on all of American society through the threat of violence targeting the public (Chisom et al., 2022). Much like the way that terrorists target innocent civilian populations, mass shooters have often deliberately chosen to direct acts of firearm violence toward highly populated areas, killing and injuring many people. For example, the violent acts committed by Peyton Gendron, Patrick Wood Crusius, and Robert Bowers took place respectively at a grocery store, a Walmart, and a synagogue (Crusius, 2019; Pittwire, 2020).

In this current era of political polarization, concern over firearm violence now extends into threats against societal leaders and legitimate government authority (Kleinfeld, 2023). "Three percenters" claim that only a small number of people with guns should be able to overthrow the government and impose minority rule (Anti-Defamation League, 2022; Beutel & Johnson, 2021). A segment of the American military apparently has no qualms with overthrowing the government (Carless, 2023; Toroph, 2023). False accusations of pedophilia and Satanism originating with the QAnon conspiracy theory have demonized political and community leaders on both national and local levels and inspired personal and political violence (Amarasingham & Argentino, 2020; Jensen & Sheehan, 2021; Kokotakis, 2023; Moskalenko et al., 2023; Sommer, 2021). As nationalists glamorize myths of America's Christian past through hagiographies of the founders and sanitizing the country's troubled history of slavery and discrimination, some groups argue that insurrection is the pathway to a golden age of moral excellence (Fung, 2024; Rowley, 2021). According to some observers, the results of these beliefs have been a growing cacophony of voices promoting or at least accepting the inevitability of

public violence through threats against public officials and belief in the coming of a second civil war (e.g., Zogby, 2021).

The study of cognitive radicalization directly addresses the development of these beliefs and their potentially violent impact. Cognitive radicalization itself refers to the process by which individuals adopt extreme beliefs or ideologies that justify violent extremism (Frissen, 2021; Wolfowicz et al., 2021). The concept has emerged within recent research on public violence, which is viewed as an expanding (some say new) area of study in criminal justice and criminology blossoming in the wake of the growth of mass shootings and homegrown terrorist activity (Miller-Idriss, 2020; Qureshi, 2020).

This thesis explores the correlation between gun ownership and various ideas related to polarization, extremism, and public violence using the Social Networks Survey from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). PRRI research has become especially well known for its tracking of the acceptance of conspiracism and extremism in contemporary American society, including beliefs in QAnon, election denialism, and political violence (Smith, 2022; 2023).

By studying cognitive radicalization, we can gain insights into why individuals choose to engage in firearm violence and how these decisions are influenced by their beliefs and perceptions. This knowledge can inform strategies for preventing firearm violence, such as interventions aimed at addressing radical beliefs or improving access to mental health services.

An example of this prevention occurred recently when Discord, a messaging platform popular with gamers, tipped the FBI after a 13-year-old boy from Ohio allegedly made detailed threats on the platform to commit a mass shooting at the Temple Israel in Canton, Ohio (ABC News, 2023; Osborne and Edwards, 2023). After completing a review of the extreme and antisemitic postings, Discord counter-extremism analysts proactively removed the posts and

reported this user to the FBI's National Threat Operations Center. The reported user was investigated and arrested by the FBI, preventing any attack from occurring at the temple. The relevance of understanding Cognitive Radicalization and Gun Violence extends to every community in the U.S.

In conclusion, every community has the potential to be affected by firearm violence, and thus, every community can benefit from a deeper understanding of the cognitive processes that can lead to such violence. While the Second Amendment allows for the legal ownership of guns, it does not inherently lead to firearm violence. Firearm violence is a result of human actions and decisions, often influenced by radicalized beliefs. Therefore, understanding cognitive radicalization and its role in firearm violence is crucial for every community in the U.S.

Chapter Two

Literature Review and Theory

Mass shootings and domestic extremism have unfortunately become new forms of public violence in the U.S. (Lopez et al., 2020; Miller-Idriss, 2020). Nonetheless, people engaging in these kinds of behavior almost always hold positive predispositions toward the behavior (Wolfowicz et al., 2021). An example of this would be an individual or group believing that an act of violence is necessary to save the country from something that is believed by the individual or group to be happening, or that the individual or group believes is going to happen. A sample of this type of thought can be viewed in the manifesto document posted by the El Paso, Texas Walmart mass shooter from 2019 (Crusius, 2019).

The authors of the two-pyramids model provide a mechanism to explain how people accelerate levels of extremist ideas and people who engage in radical action as an improved solution (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). Cognitive radicalization precedes most of these acts of violent extremism. Evidence overwhelmingly indicates a strong correlation between radical attitudes and intentions (Feddes et al., 2015; Schibley, 2004), and between these cognitive outcomes with radical behaviors (Baier et al., 2016; Bélanger et al., 2014; Wolfowicz et al., 2021).

Cognitive Radicalization

Many researchers do not view radicalization as "ordinary" criminal intent for multiple reasons (Quresha, 2020). First, in the United States, acts of public violence are perpetrated by individuals driven by diverse ideological beliefs. These individuals have undergone varying processes of radicalization and possess distinct grievances or life experiences that steer them toward embracing terrorism (Quresha, 2020). This complicates the task of directing prevention

and intervention strategies towards a particular "at-risk" demographic. Furthermore, radicalization towards terrorism, whether at an individual or group level, can be driven by extremist ideologies of groups, or it can transpire on a personal level, a phenomenon often termed "lone wolf terrorism" Next, the nature of radicalization and types of extremist attacks are dynamic, changing from year to year and from decade to decade. Finally, Researchers from the University of Massachusetts Lowell discovered that peers are often the first to detect initial indicators of radicalization. However, their propensity to report these signs is diminished due to a bias towards reluctance (Quresha, 2020).

The theory of cognitive radicalization attempts to explain motivations for violent extremism and its behavioral outcomes (Wolfowicz et al., 2021). The theory is a psychological model that explains how individuals become radicalized. A psychological model is a theory that describes and explains phenomena of human behavior (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Moghaddam and Sardoč, 2020; Wolfowicz et al., 2021). According to the theory, radicalization is a process that involves the adoption of extremist beliefs and values, which are reinforced by social networks and group dynamics (Ahmed, 2020). Cognitive radicalization occurs when individuals endorse ideas, values, or beliefs that are not in accordance with societal norms and values, such as the rule of law. Cognitive radicalization theory also incorporates ideology from self-control theory relating to personal discipline and thrill-seeking behavior to whether someone will engage in illegal behaviors (Pauwels & Schils, 2014; Silke, 2008; Wolfowicz et al., 2021).

Cognitive radicalization theory has important implications for countering violent extremism. The theory of cognitive radicalization suggests that efforts to prevent radicalization should focus on addressing the underlying grievances that contribute to cognitive radicalization, such as social and economic inequality, rather than simply targeting extremist groups and

individuals (Ahmed, 2020). Prevention of social and economic inequality to alleviate grievances and prevent future violent thoughts from turning to violent action sounds simple enough. The subjects of grievances dealing with cultural belief, political belief, or religious belief are anything but simple and are often quite complicated.

Stages of Radicalization

The theory of cognitive radicalization suggests that cognitive radicalization is a gradual process that involves several stages, including exposure to extremist ideas, identification with extremist groups, and the adoption of extremist beliefs.

Borum

Borum (2011) has published a 4-stage model for the development of a terrorist mindset. It contains an explanation for how grievances and vulnerabilities are transformed into hatred of a target group, and how the hatred can become justification for violent action. The stages in the Borum model consist of grievance at the first stage, or "it's not right" opinion at the bottom of the model. The second stage is injustice, or "it's not fair" belief regarding a subject. The third stage of the Borum model is target acquisition, or "the grievance and injustice experienced are your fault" thinking. The final stage is distancing and devaluation of the target or likening the target to "evil" type reasoning.

Moghaddam and Sardoč

Moghaddam and Sardoč (2020) developed a model that also attributes the process of radicalization to developing steps of exposure and thought. This model has been framed as the "staircase to terrorism." Common models of radicalization have a consistency in that the initial exposure or involvement onto a path of terroristic behavior begins with perceived adversity. Discontent and adversity perceived as deprivation, grievance, or perceived injustice create a path

to violent extremism. The summary of this point is that the path of radicalization starts with a perceived "wrong" or something that a person, or group, believes is "wrong;" radical ideas and beliefs can compel people to act.

Klausen

Klausen et al. (2018) hypothesized that radicalization consists of four steps. The first step is the active seeking of proviolent worldviews and group affiliations, which is especially likely to occur in young adulthood (Klausen et al, 2018; Frissen 2021). Methods of radicalization are often linked to the internet by individuals attempting to explain changes in behavior. One study "considers radicalization as a phasic trajectory whereby an individual gradually adopts increasingly deviant behaviors ranging from the active search of radical information online to the acceptance of inhumane and uncivilized behaviors, to criminality, and to support for political violence."

The second step of the process involves media socialization (Frissen, 2021). Young adults internalize the narratives and moral arguments that are present in these media. This step could also be viewed as an extension of social learning theory as developed by Albert Bandura. An increasing amount of literature has exposed that violent discourse is often saturated with moral disengagement arguments (Frissen, 2021; Frissen & d'Haenens, 2017). Moral disengagement is a psychological concept initially proposed by Bandura; it refers to the cognitive restructuring process that allows individuals to disassociate from their internal moral standards and behave unethically without feeling distressed (Newman et al., 2020; Schaefer and Bouwmeester, 2021). This process can deactivate self-sanctions, thereby clearing the way for ethical transgressions. "The relationship between moral disengagement and juvenile delinquency is well-established in the literature" (Bandura et al., 1996; Moore, 2015; Frissen, 2021).

Step three assumes higher levels of information-seeking and moral disengagement (Klausen et al, 2018; Frissen, 2021). Individuals are more likely to get involved in juvenile delinquency. Step three is pertinent to future adult behavior because there is evidence suggesting moral disengagement in adolescence may explain antisocial behavior in adulthood (DeLisi et al., 2014). Youths with higher levels of moral disengagement were found to be more delinquent, aggressive, and committed more acts of violence compared to those with lower levels.

The last step, based on previous analyses of radicalized individuals, hypothesizes that young people with a stronger involvement in juvenile delinquency are more likely to radicalize on a cognitive level (Frissen, 2021; Klausen et al, 2018). These people would likely be included in a category on the behavior radicalization triangle of the two-pyramids model.

The steps hypothesized by Klausen et al. may explain why people having radical beliefs, opinions, or ideas as adults will participate in an act of violence. While there is less direct research on this topic, it is plausible that the mechanisms of moral disengagement and antisocial personality could also apply to the process of radicalization. The same justifications and deactivations of self-regulatory standards that allow for delinquency could potentially facilitate the acceptance of extremist ideologies. However, more research is needed in this area.

The Two Pyramids

Of the four models of stages mentioned in this chapter, the two-pyramids model has the greatest influence on my conceptualization of violent extremism. The two-pyramids model of cognitive radicalization is a psychological model that explains the process of radicalization (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Figure 3). The model consists of two components: the opinion pyramid and the action pyramid. McCauley and Moskalenko (2017) proposed that radicalization

rooted in ideology and opinion is a different psychological phenomenon than radicalization originating in action. A person may have a brain full of radical thoughts, beliefs, or ideas, and never act based upon those thoughts, beliefs, or ideas. The opinion pyramid represents people sharing accelerating levels of extremist ideas, ranging from neutrality to personal moral obligation. Apex levels of the cognitive radicalization opinion pyramid include behavior associated with personal moral obligation and justification. The action pyramid represents people who engage in radical action, ranging from passivity to legal activism to political violence and terrorism (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017).

Social Identity Theory

Radicalization methods are often viewed through the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership. Groups provide a framework for understanding oneself in the context of a larger community, defining identity, based on shared attributes, values, or goals. People classify themselves and others into social groups, race, gender, or nationality. Individuals adopt the identity of a particular group, seeing themselves in terms of group characteristics and adopting its norms and behaviors. This simplifies the social environment but can lead to stereotyping. This theory sheds light on phenomena related to prejudice, bias, and discrimination within social groups. These subjects can be sources of the grievances that provide certain individuals the reasoning to radicalize.

Guns and Cognitive Radicalization

Cognitive radicalization relates to firearm violence because individuals who radicalize at the top levels of the two pyramids model as terrorists or mass shooters often utilize firearms. These individuals are choosing firearms as their preferred tool for killing and damaging human

lives because guns are an efficient method. Guns are obtainable in the U.S. legally, within the law, and are inexpensive. Compared to alternative means of causing death and damage to human life, say explosive devices, guns are less regulated legally than explosives and more available illegally.

During the past thirty years extremist attackers preferred primary weapon type has changed from explosives to firearms (Jones et al., 2022). "Explosives were the weapons in 50% of all extreme attacks from 1994 to 2020, data from 2015 to 2020, however, indicate a new trend, radical perpetrators used firearms in 73% of fatal attacks from 2015 to 2020 (Jones et al., 2022). This change explains why firearms are related to cognitive radicalization.

An example of this change and a form of domestic terrorism behavior is Patrick Crusius. Crusius targeted El Paso Walmart employees who were Hispanic or Latinx. People who appeared to him as undocumented immigrants. Crusius (2019) highlights in his posted manifesto document both political and economic reasons for his attack. The manifesto provides an example of cognitive radicalization and its connection to firearms.

Political Reasons

His radical beliefs involved Democrats intending to use open borders, free healthcare for undocumented immigrants, and a path to citizenship to gain political advantage or votes. This strategy involves importing and legalizing millions of new voters, potentially leading to nearly unanimous Hispanic support for Democrats in the future.

Crusius also held that the heavy Hispanic population makes Texas a potential stronghold for Democrats; losing Texas and other states with significant Hispanic populations to Democrats could significantly impact presidential elections.

Crusius also criticized the Republican Party for division on immigration, but the Republican division on immigration is realistic and not radical. At the same time, he clearly sides with the idea that a "wrong," grievance or perceived injustice is occurring with immigration. As mentioned in the material from Moghaddam and Sardoč, radicalization models have consistency, in that initial exposure or involvement onto a path of terroristic behavior begins with perceived adversity or perceived injustice.

Economic Reasons

Within the economic reasons section of the manifesto, Crusius believed that continued immigration is detrimental to America's future, automation is a significant issue, and some predict that half of American jobs could be lost within two decades; while individuals may be retrained, most will not be. The influx of millions of immigrants (both legal and illegal) exacerbates this problem. His original beliefs and ideas regarding political reasoning seem to extend into economic beliefs.

He refers to immigrants as "invaders" that are associated with high birthrates. America will need to implement a basic universal income to prevent widespread poverty and civil unrest due to job loss. These ideas compelled Crusius to act; he mentions having a duty to act and protect the U.S. from the invasion. The two pyramids model of cognitive radicalization opinion pyramid represents personal moral obligation at the apex level; Crusius seemed to have this personal moral obligation in his thinking before his mass shooting attack.

Crusius is an example of how guns relate to cognitive radicalization through the gear he selected. In his manifesto, he notes that the civilian version of the AK47 (WASR 10) has limitations as it overheats rapidly after approximately 100 quick successive shots due to its design. To mitigate this, Crusius planned to use a heat-resistant glove. Additionally, the 8m3

bullet, unique among 7.62×39 bullets, fragments like a pistol hollow point when fired from an AK47. However, this design sacrifices penetration, making the AK47 a questionable choice even with this bullet (Crusius, 2019). His mission was to deter future immigration by utilizing these weapons, specifically choosing items to enable mass casualties with extensive damage. Crusius chose and wielded the guns with intent to harm other human beings, immigrants, or people that appeared as immigrants, to him. His skewed perception, cognitively radical, and action, were necessary portions of the attack, for it to occur. Crusius is one example of how and why guns relate to cognitive radicalization. PRRI data analyzed demonstrates that other people in the country believe in cognitively radical ideas.

Summary

The literature review discussed the theory of cognitive radicalization, which is a psychological model that explains how individuals become radicalized. This process involves the adoption of extremist beliefs and values, reinforced by social networks and group dynamics. Cognitive radicalization is a gradual process that includes exposure to extremist ideas, identification with extremist groups, and the adoption of extremist beliefs.

The theory suggests that cognitive radicalization is influenced by factors such as political and social grievances, economic inequality, and cultural and religious differences. It proposes that efforts to prevent radicalization should focus on addressing these underlying grievances rather than simply targeting extremist groups and individuals.

Cognitive radicalization theory also incorporates elements from the self-control theory and the theory of planned behavior, relating to self-control and thrill-seeking behavior. These traits have been found to correlate positively with radical attitudes and behaviors.

An explanation of why radicalization is not viewed as ordinary crime by many researchers is included. This is due to the complexity of the subject, the variety of motivations behind terrorist acts, the individual and group dynamics involved in radicalization, and the dynamic nature of radicalization and types of extremist attacks. These complexities make it difficult to target prevention and intervention efforts toward a specific "vulnerable" population.

The literature review concludes with discussing the process of radicalization, particularly cognitive radicalization, and its link to antisocial behavior. The process of radicalization is often linked to the internet, where individuals actively seek out radical information. This process involves four steps: seeking information about extremism and extremist groups, internalizing narratives and moral arguments present in these media, getting involved in juvenile delinquency or adult deviant behavior, and, finally, radicalizing on a cognitive level.

Moral disengagement, a concept proposed by Bandura, plays a significant role in this process. It refers to the cognitive restructuring process that allows individuals to disassociate from their internal moral standards and behave unethically without feeling distress. ("Moral disengagement mechanisms and its relationship ... - Semantic Scholar") This process is linked to juvenile delinquency in youth and antisocial behavior in adulthood.

The research question, hypotheses, and methodology are presented in chapter three.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This project is based on a secondary data analysis of the Social Networks Survey (SNS) sponsored by the Public Religion Research Institute from Washington, DC (PRRI, 2022b). The survey was conducted online from March 11 to March 30, 2022, and included a total of 5,461 respondents. The participants were a diverse group of 5,042 adults, aged 18 and above, residing across all 50 states of the United States. These individuals were members of the Ipsos's Knowledge Panel. To ensure adequate representation from smaller states, an additional 419 participants were enlisted through Ipsos's opt-in survey panels (PRRI, 2022b).

Participants are enlisted to the Knowledge Panel utilizing a methodology based on addresses from the Delivery Sequence File of the USPS. This file is a comprehensive database encompassing all delivery addresses within the United States. The YSU Institutional Review Board classified the secondary data analysis as exempt. The research question and hypotheses about Cognitive Radicalization and Gun Violence are presented in the following information.

Research Question and Hypotheses

Question: Is there an association between the accessibility of firearms and adherence to potentially violent beliefs?

H_0: Access to a firearm is not associated with adherence to potentially violent beliefs.

H_1: Access to a firearm is associated positively with adherence to potentially violent beliefs.

Variables

Figure 4 shows the model for this project. The dependent variables indicating cognitive radicalization and the independent variable is gun ownership. Sociodemographic variables

function as controls for social identity and are here treated as mediating factors. The variables

analyzed from the SNS are listed in Tables 1 and 3.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables are various ideas associated with contemporary radicalization

from the PRRI Social Networks Survey. Questions 9a-e have each been described elsewhere as

ideas that could radicalize one toward violence, and agreement with them could be regarded as

movement at or toward the apex of the opinion pyramid. (Amarasingham & Argentino, 2020;

Anti-Defamation League, 2022; Beutel & Johnson, 2021; Fung, 2024; Jensen & Sheehan, 2021;

Rowley, 2021; Sommer, 2021). These questions follow in the order that they are listed in the

study:

Q9. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following?

Q9a. The government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of
Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation.

The Question 9a variable is called in this study Satanic Panic about Pedophilia or Satanic

Panic, for short. This variable is one of two variables in this list directly associated with the

QAnon conspiracy theory, which has been tied to violence on an individual level and has

added national significance with the appearance of QAnon symbolism at the January 6

insurrection (Amarasingham & Argentino, 2020; Jensen & Sheehan, 2021; Kokotakis,

2023; Moskalenko et al., 2023; Sommer, 2021). Coverage of the QAnon phenomena is a

noteworthy aspect of PRRI surveys (Smith, 2023).

Q9b. The 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump.

Question 9b results are the dependent variable called in this study, Trump Election Stolen.

In the wake of controversies surrounding the 2020 presidential election, there has been an

ongoing concern about the possibility that election denialism could become a justification

for future political violence (Bynam, 2023).

Q9c. Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.

The Question 9c variable is called in this study Antigovernment Violence. The activity of

antigovernment groups has been a matter of extraordinary interest since the January 6 riot

(Beutel & Johnson, 2021; Kokotakis, 2023; Toroph, 2023).

Q9d. There is a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders.

The Question 9d variable is called in this study Storm is Coming. This variable is the

second one in this list directly related to the QAnon conspiracy theory.

Q9e. God has granted America a special role in human history.

Question 9e results are the dependent variable called in this study America Special

Historical Role. This variable is sometimes seen as related to Christian nationalism. While

the extent to which Christian nationalism should be classified as violent extremism is a

matter of debate, there is little question that some of its adherents have legitimated public

violence including the January 6 resurrection with the ideas and symbols of Christian

nationalism (Fung, 2024; PRRI, 2022b; Rogers, 2021; Rowley, 2021).

The dependent variables were reverse-recoded from questions 9a-e. Completely agree

responses were coded as agree and given the value of 4 in the variable. Mostly agree responses

were coded as agree and given the value of 3 in the variable. Mostly disagree responses were

coded as disagree and given the value of 2 in the variable. Completely disagree responses were

coded as disagree and given the value of 1 in the variable.

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Furthermore, the variables are recoded to the dependent variables analyzed to facilitate binary regression analysis of each variable with SPSS. Each dependent variable analyzed has the same assigned value system. A value of 1 and 2 from the original Likert variable is assigned a No value. Values of 3 and 4 from the original Likert variable are assigned a Yes value. This recoding enabled binary regression analyses with the dependent variables in SPSS.

Independent and Control Variables

The independent variable in this analysis is firearm ownership, operationalized by Question 34, which asked respondents whether there was access to a gun in their house or garage. As noted in Chapter Two, access to firearms could be seen as progress up the action pyramid.

The control variables identified aspects of social identity – age range, education level, income level, marital status, and sex –are listed in Table 3.

Analytic Strategy

Frequency tables and binary logistic regression were conducted with SPSS using the listed dependent variables for questions 9a-9e, question 34, and the control variables. Bivariate analyses were conducted between each combination of dependent and independent variables (unadjusted analyses) and with all independent variables together (adjusted analyses). Results of unadjusted and adjusted analyses as well as predicted results are reported in Chapter 4.

Statistical number interpretation is commonly addressed with the following instructions. The column B generated by SPSS Statistics contains the parameter estimates for the y-intercept – constant, and individual variables that are used to build the regression equation. The sign of B determines whether the direction is positive or negative (Rogers, 2020). Tables generated by SPSS are formatted differently than APA format tables. The effect is determined by the

exponentiated B, also known as the odds ratio. The null hypothesis is the odds ratio is one (not zero). The ratio is determined by its distance from 1.00. An odds ratio of 1.78 is 1.78X higher than the reference category or 78% higher than the occurrence in the reference category. An odds ratio of .78 is 22% less than the reference category (Rogers, 2020).

Effect size can be referred to as practical significance. Since a tiny effect can still be statistically significant, effect size provides the needed assessment about whether the results are noteworthy, or what is sometimes called "practical significance." The Cambridge estimates were used to interpret the effect size for an odds ratio as follows: For odds ratios greater than one: 1.50=small, 3.50=medium, 9.00=strong (Cambridge MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit, 2021). For odds ratios less than one: .65=small, .30=medium, .10=strong. The significance column gives the p-value used in determining statistical significance. The null hypothesis is that B=0 (Rogers, 2020).

Regarding the goodness of fit: The closest approximation to the R^2 is the Nagelkerke R^2, which is one of the pseudo-R^2 numbers. Pseudo R^2 numbers measure improvements in the model over the model with only the constant, but they are not percentages of the variance explained. There is no effect size for this statistic. The statistic is regarded as especially useful when comparing results across models, but as an absolute measure of fit, it is more dubious (Rogers, 2020).

For the classification table, the sensitivity and specificity are commonly reported numbers. There is no set rule for the interpretation of these numbers, but in general the higher the better. In behavioral research, the classification table often does not make sense if the cut point is set to zero when the probability of the occurrence of the dependent variable is much different (Rogers, 2020). In classification tables generated by SPSS in logistic regression output, the

observed values of the dependent variable are represented in the rows of the table and predicted values are represented by the columns.

In binary logistic regression, the higher value of the dependent variable is necessarily the category whose probability is predicted by the model (i.e., the target category) and will be the second row and column of the classification table. There will be a "Percentage Correct" column with the percentage of correct classifications for each of the dependent-variable categories. The percentage correct for the first category is the specificity, although this is usually expressed as a proportion. The percentage correct for the second category, the target category, is the sensitivity (which is also usually expressed as a proportion). ("Sensitivity and specificity in logistic regression Classification ... - IBM") By default, a case is classified as the target category if the probability of the target event is greater than or equal to .5 for that case. Otherwise, the case is classified as the non-target event. So, the percentage of correct classification figures represents the specificity and sensitivity when the cutoff value for the predicted probability = .5 by default (IBM, 2024).

Chapter four features study analyses results and written summaries for each dependent variable analyzed. Standardized regression coefficients results appear in Table 5, at the end of the document.

<center>**Chapter Four**</center>

<center>**Results**</center>

Among the five dependent variables, the highest level of agreement was found with America Special Historical Role (Question 9e) at 43.6% (Table 1). Trump Election Stolen (Question 9b) had support by 30.1%, Storm is Coming (Question 9d), 25.9%, followed by 18.7% for Antigovernment Violence (Question 9c), and 16.0% for Satanic Panic (Question 9a). Guns were present in 36.3% of the sample answering Question 34 (Table 2).

Gun ownership was disproportionately associated with Trump Election Stolen and Antigovernment Violence in a manner that supports the alternative hypothesis (Hypothesis H_1). Figure 4 shows half of the individuals holding these two beliefs had access to firearms compared to 36% of the population overall. America Special Historical Role and the two QAnon-specific questions – Satanic Panic about Pedophilia and Storm is Coming – had gun ownership rates only slightly above the population.

<center>**Regression Results for Gun Ownership**</center>

In the binary logistic regression models, gun ownership was associated in unadjusted models with a small increase in the likelihood of belief in Trump Election Stolen (OR = 2.267, p<.001) and Antigovernment Violence (OR=2.259, p<.001). The inclusion of statistical controls has almost no effect on Trump Election Stolen (OR=2.264, p<.001) and only a slight effect on Antigovernment Violence (OR=1.964, p<.001). The relationship of gun ownership with America Special Historical Role is slightly below the threshold for a small level of practical significance (OR=1.50) in the unadjusted model (OR=1.451, p<.001), and the size of the effect of the relationship fell in the adjusted model (OR=1.380, p<.001). Other relationships between gun

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ownership and potentially violent beliefs did not come close to practical significance even when statistically significant.

Regression Results for Social Identity

The influence of social identity was seen with both education and income with the largest coefficients revealing moderate-sized effects. The likelihood of gun ownership increased as the educational level decreased across all measures of cognitive radicalization. The relationship between gun ownership and the measures of cognitive radicalization were both statistically and practically significant at all levels of education across all dependent variables when compared to college-educated individuals (the reference category). These relationships consistently peaked for individuals without a high school diploma, and moderate-sized effects (OR>3.5) relative to the college-educated were found in both the adjusted effects in both QAnon variables – Satanic Panic about Pedophilia (OR=5.837, p<.001) and A Storm is Coming (OR=5.200, p<.001) – and Antigovernment Violence (OR=5.340, p<.001). These results indicated that gun ownership in these variables was consistently more than 5 times higher among those without a high school education than those having a college degree.

The relationship between gun ownership and potentially violent beliefs also increased with a decline in income. Moderate-sized relationships were obtained for adjusted models for Satanic Panic for Pedophilia (OR=6.424, p<.001), Storm is Coming (OR=5.199, p<.001), and Antigovernment Violence (5.200, p<.001) when compared to individuals with incomes of $100,000 or more. These results mean that individuals agreeing with these ideas and making less than $10,000 a year were 5 or more times more likely to own guns than those with high incomes.

Two other variables yield more sporadic results. Age consistently showed small associations (OR>1.5) between age and radicalization among 18-24- and 25–44-year-olds for

Satanic Panic about Pedophilia and Antigovernment Violence when compared to individuals 65

years or more (reference category). In looking at the unadjusted model relationship between the

dependent variable Satanic Panic About Pedophilia and the independent variable age range 18-

24, the effect or odds ratio is 1.970 (p<.01). With the adjusted model, the odds ratio rose to 2.554

(p<.001). The unadjusted model revealed the relationship between Satanic Panic about

Pedophilia and our independent variable age range 25-44 and had the effect or odds ratio of

2.278 (p≤ .001), a small effect. The effect size remained small in the adjusted model with an

odds ratio of 2.043 (p<.001).

In the unadjusted model, we found the following relationship between Antigovernment

Violence and the age range 25-44 independent variable. The effect or odds ratio corresponding to

this relationship was 1.502 (p<.001), a small relationship. However, in the adjusted model, the

odds ratio fell below the 1.50 threshold.

Single status resulted in the lowest likelihood across all variables, where it played to role

of the reference variable (OR=1.00). Most categories for married and formerly married

individuals exhibited small increases over single status with Trump Election Stolen. Within

America Special Historical Role, all categories for marital status in the adjusted model small and

statistically significant increases over single status for Now married, Widowed, and Divorced

individuals; Now married and Widowed also show small, significant increases in the unadjusted

models as well.

No effects associated with sex/gender (male = 1 and female = 0) reached the level of a

small decrease (OR<.70), even when statistically significant.

Chapter Five

Conclusions

This study found some support for the alternative hypotheses (H$_1$) in that small relationships were found between gun ownership and measures of potentially violent ideas Trump Election Stolen and Antigovernment Violence. Other results, even when statistically significant, were tied to effects too small to be practical.

Although there was less conceptual discussion about the control variables associated with social identity, consistent patterns were found in that across all measures of cognitive radicalization there was an increase in gun ownership as the education level and income level declined. Conclusions about demographic characteristics demonstrated in this study were consistent with other studies regarding cognitive radicalization.

A major limitation of this study is the cross-sectional nature of the survey. Ideally, we would want to be able to say something about causality. Does owning a gun cause a person to radicalize? Or it is the opposite, that is, does a person radicalizing go out and buy an assault weapon, as was the case with Crusius? Because we cannot track out the temporality in this process, we can only identify after-the-fact associations and cannot attribute causality.

It should be noted that a portion of the gun access data was missing from the Social Networks Survey data; attempts to contact PRRI regarding this and another issue with the data were made by Dr. Rogers. PRRI did not respond. Another limitation was the use of the Likert Scale response data to enable binary regression performance. Binary Regression Analysis in SPSS cannot be performed with a scale variable. The recoding was necessary, but the recoding of scale response variables to binary variables can present an avenue for argument of accuracy. Response variables of a Likert-type scale recoding present the avenue for argument of accuracy because a Likert response of "Mostly Agree" to a question statement becomes the same as

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"Agree." This limitation of accuracy also works in the reverse side of a Likert Scale response variable. A scale response of "Mostly Disagree" becomes the same as "Disagree."

There is no method of eliminating this limitation of accuracy with the recoding methodology to enable binary regression analyses in SPSS utilized in Cognitive Radicalization and Gun Violence. A partial solution with Likert variable recoding in future studies could be assigning Completely Agree responses differently during recoding so that Completely Agree responses and other responses are separate. Future analysis of Likert Scale response data may involve another analysis method of the data in SPSS Statistics.

Greater knowledge of IBM SPSS Statistics would be required and recommended for future study of this type of data. From a student perspective, the graduate statistics course (CRJS 6942) was challenging. Future researchers could improve their efficiency by becoming familiar with IBM SPSS Statistics Software and functionality. Including anything else regarding SPSS functionality in (CRJS 6942) and still meeting the objective requirements of the statistics aspects of the course would be difficult, at best, for students.

Ideally, if conducting the study again, and if resources were available, the design of a new survey instrument would be implemented. A different type of IRB approval would be necessary, but the data obtained from a new survey instrument would be more specific to certain criteria. The variable response data collected in the new instrument would be variable response non-Likert Scale questions / answers. This change in question / answer methods on the new survey instrument would help eliminate the need for the recoding of response variables in SPSS. Change in question / answer variable types on the new survey instrument would also eliminate the avenue for an argument against accuracy of the recode methodology used currently.

In a redo of this study, the population receiving the survey would be larger; the larger the population, the more accurate the response data collected. Large survey populations can quickly become extremely expensive though. A thorough budget and budget narrative of the project would need to be completed. Around one year ago, Survey Monkey cost close to $5000 for 2500 survey respondents; the more respondents, the more expensive the project becomes. In this sense with additional respondents surveyed the response data provides more accuracy, which is a positive. At the same time, additional respondents increase the project budget, which is just a budgetary issue that may require additional resources. In addition, variables about political affiliation, and religious, and cultural beliefs should be added and analyzed during future studies.

Recommendations for future research are addressed toward cognitive radicalization research specifically dealing with social media platforms where radical thoughts, beliefs, or ideas are posted. For example, a person who intends to commit a mass shooting may post a threat or an actual manifesto document. It currently takes too long for authorities to become aware of such posts, analyze the posts, document them, and take action to prevent a violent occurrence. Additional research in the area would enable new methods for authorities to pursue awareness of radical postings.

Additional research should also involve the use of Artificial Intelligence working along with humans to analyze radical postings. AI can perform the analysis of radical postings much faster than current methods. Future research in cognitive radicalization utilizing AI for analyzing radical postings could enable authorities to more likely be able to prevent violent acts from occurring. The key topics future research of Cognitive Radicalization and Gun Violence should focus on are awareness of radical postings more quickly; a faster analysis of the posting(s) utilizing more AI to determine things like the sentiment of the posting(s), and a more

collaborative effort of applicable entities to stop the violent occurrence from happening after the analyses.

The prospect of being able to stop violent acts before they occur may seem unrealistic and altruistic, but it is neither. Properly applying improvements in methods, as well as increases of knowledge about cognitive radicalization that are discovered with additional research can result in less violent acts carried out. Additional knowledge of cognitive radicalization and facilitation of new policies and laws regarding what can occur during web-scraping, and what can be legally done with any radical material discovered are needed. This may require flexibility constitutionally regarding what is private or is not. Material posted on messaging boards or similar media types may need to be more closely scrutinized. Preventing events from happening like the example of prevention mentioned in Cognitive Radicalization and Gun Violence about Discord analysts needs to become more common. Discord analysts became aware of radical user posts on the platform, analyzed the posts, and reported the user to the FBI. The FBI was able to investigate and arrest the Discord user, preventing the potential attack.

PRRI Social Networks Data sheds light on the complex interplay between firearms, violence, and demographic factors. These findings contribute to our understanding of social networks and their influence on attitudes and behaviors. The information obtained during this study is valuable to society because it has the potential to be part of the solution to radicalization and violent acts. Fewer firearm violence deaths during 2024 would be a change in behavior that society would welcome.

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Table 1
Potential Radicalism: Questions 9a-e Survey Responses

	Satanic Panic		Trump Election Stolen		Antigovernment Violence		Storm is Coming		America Special Role	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Likert Values										
Completely Disagree	3295	61.7	3073	57.3	2963	55.2	2157	40.5	1945	36.4
Mostly Disagree	1191	22.3	679	12.7	1400	26.1	1789	33.6	1064	19.9
Mostly Agree	622	11.6	880	16.4	755	14.1	1032	19.4	1569	29.4
Completely Agree	232	4.3	734	13.7	250	4.7	348	6.5	760	14.2
Total	5340	100.0	5366	100.0	5368	100.0	5326	100.0	5338	100.0
Recode Values										
No	4486	84.0	3752	69.9	4363	81.3	3946	74.1	3009	56.4
Yes	854	16.0	1614	30.1	1005	18.7	1380	25.9	2329	43.6
Total	5340	100.0	5366	100.0	5368	100.0	5326	100.0	5338	100.0

Table 2

Gun in House or Garage Results

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	2887	52.9	63.7	63.7
Yes	1646	30.1	36.3	100.0
Valid Total	4533	83.0	100.0	
	928	17.0		
Total	5461	100.0		

Table 3

Control Variables

Variables	N	%
Age Range		
18-24	206	3.8
25-44	1515	27.7
45-64	2032	37.2
65 or more	1708	31.3
Total	5461	100.0
Education Level		
Less than high school	272	5.0
High school	1304	23.9
Some college	1557	28.5
Bachelor's degree or higher	2328	42.6
Total	5461	100.0
Income Level		
Less than $10,000	190	3.5
$10,000-$24,999	540	9.9
$25,000-$49,999	926	17.0
$50,000-$74,999	897	16.4
$75,000-$99,999	754	13.8
$100,000-$149,999	967	17.7
$150,000 or more	1186	21.7
Total	5460	100.0
Marital Status		
Now Married	3299	60.4
Widowed	344	6.3
Divorced	593	10.9
Separated	98	1.8
Never married	1127	20.6
Totals	5461	100.0
Sex		
Female	2913	53.3
Male	2548	46.7
Totals	5461	100.0

Table 4

% Gun Ownership by Question

Question	% Gun Ownership
Satanic Panic about Pedophilia	38.7%
Trump Election Stolen	50.4%
Antigovernment Violence	50.0%
Storm is Coming	38.8%
America Special Purpose	40.8%
Total	36.3%

Table 5

Odds Ratios from Binary Logistic Regressions

| Variables	Satanic Panic		Trump Election Stolen		Antigovernment Violence		Storm is Coming		America Special Historical Role	
	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted
Gun in house or garage	1.332	1.113	2.267***	2.264***	2.259***	1.964***	1.262*	1.134	1.451***	1.380***
Age (ref = 65 or more)										
18-24	1.970**	2.554***	1.422	1.081	1.338	1.485*	0.818	1.134	0.700	0.631**
25-44	2.278***	2.043***	1.133	0.936	1.502***	1.441***	1.036	0.961	0.697***	0.677***
45-64	1.338	1.330*	1.153	1.093	1.135	1.194*	0.966	0.932	0.920	0.839**
Education level (ref = College)										
Less than high school	4.431***	5.837***	2.663***	2.494***	4.622***	5.340***	3.990***	5.200***	2.269***	2.861***
High school	2.467***	3.149***	2.611***	2.836***	2.987***	3.356***	3.029***	3.645***	2.005***	2.504***
Some college	1.912***	2.216***	1.799***	2.008***	2.075***	2.363***	2.095***	2.382***	1.572***	1.799***
Income Level (ref = $150,000 and over)										
Less than $10,000	2.751***	6.424***	1.436	2.347***	2.611***	5.626***	2.224***	5.199***	2.698***	2.968***
$10,000-$24,999	1.827***	3.211***	1.250	1.657***	2.093***	3.199***	2.157***	3.937***	2.158***	2.700***
$25,000-$49,999	1.788***	2.908***	1.164	1.586***	1.408*	2.090***	1.636***	2.706***	1.633***	2.158***
$50,000-$74,999	1.226	1.901***	1.060	1.341*	1.201	1.709***	1.110	1.736***	1.282*	1.626***
$75,000-$99,999	1.047	1.676***	1.048	1.396***	1.247	1.653***	1.176	1.587***	1.106	1.450***
$100,000-$149,999	1.037	1.332*	.955	1.133	.865	1.144	1.113	1.378**	1.079	1.226*
Marital status (ref = Single)										
Now married	1.015	.686	1.500***	1.537***	1.100	.905	.958	.849*	1.293**	1.302***
Widowed	1.304	.838	1.891***	1.728***	1.161	1.015	1.010	1.144	1.619**	2.399***
Divorced	1.290	1.018	1.514*	1.567***	1.135	1.228	1.120	1.214	1.053	1.422***
Separated	1.121	1.832	1.152	1.890*	1.099	1.749*	1.041	1.661*	.781	1.476
Male	0.857	0.795**	1.083	1.052	1.109	1.055	0.913	0.841**	0.831**	0.808***
Nagelkerke R^2	.110		.104		.127		.115		.097	
Sensitivity and Specificity										
Observed - no	2706		2156		2625		2480		1715	
Observed - yes	1105		1047		1086		865		858	
Predicted - no	269		545		307		526		829	
Predicted - yes	375		712		453		562		1039	
Cut value	.16		.30		.19		.30		.44	
Overall % correct	69.2		64.3		68.8		68.6		62.0	

significance * ≤.05, ** ≤.01, *** ≤ .001

Figure 1

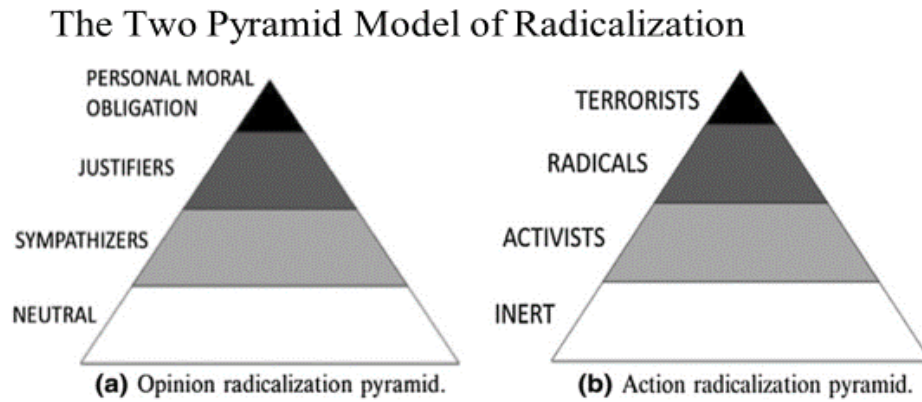*Gun Violence in the United States, 2019-2023*
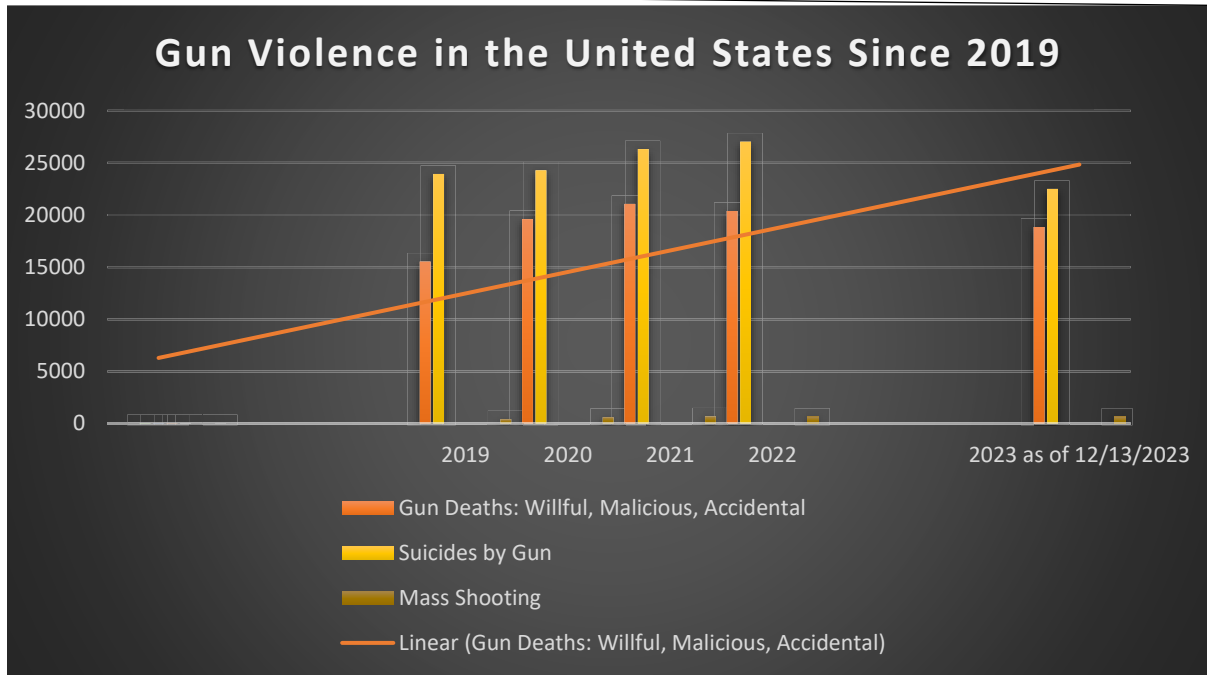
Note: Gun Violence Archive (2024). Suicide data not yet available for 2023.

Figure 2
Rate of Violent Crime Offenses by Population
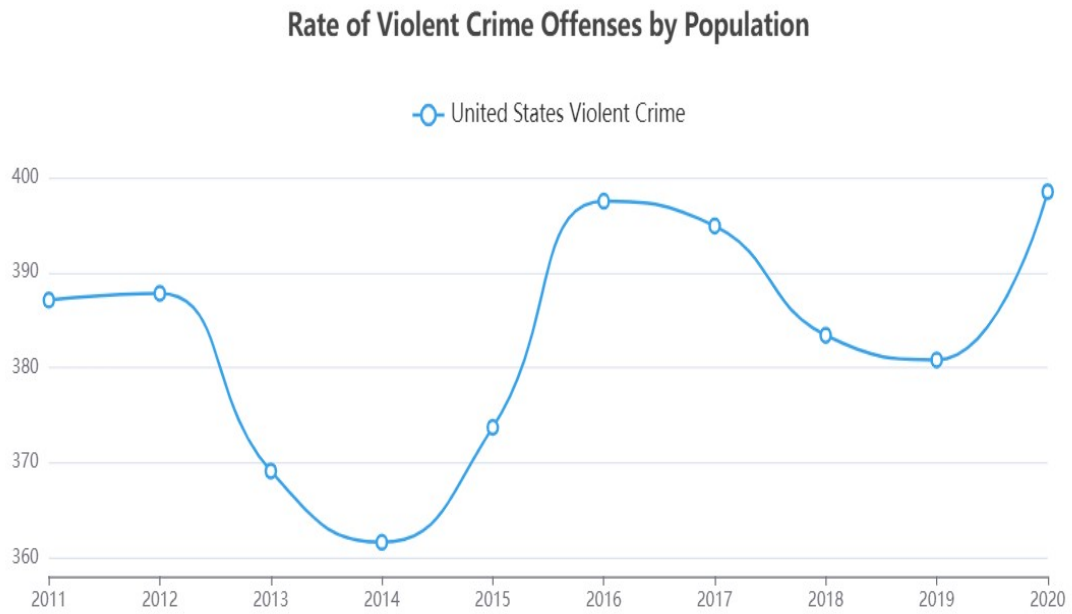
Rate per 100,000 people, by year. Source: FBI Crime Data Explorer, 2023.

Figure 3
Two-Pyramids Model of Cognitive Radicalization

The Two Pyramid Model of Radicalization

(a) Opinion radicalization pyramid.

PERSONAL MORAL OBLIGATION / JUSTIFIERS / SYMPATHIZERS / NEUTRAL

(b) Action radicalization pyramid.

TERRORISTS / RADICALS / ACTIVISTS / INERT

McCauley and Moskalenko's (2014) Two-Pyramid Model

Source: Cornell International Affairs Review and Ou, A., 2016.
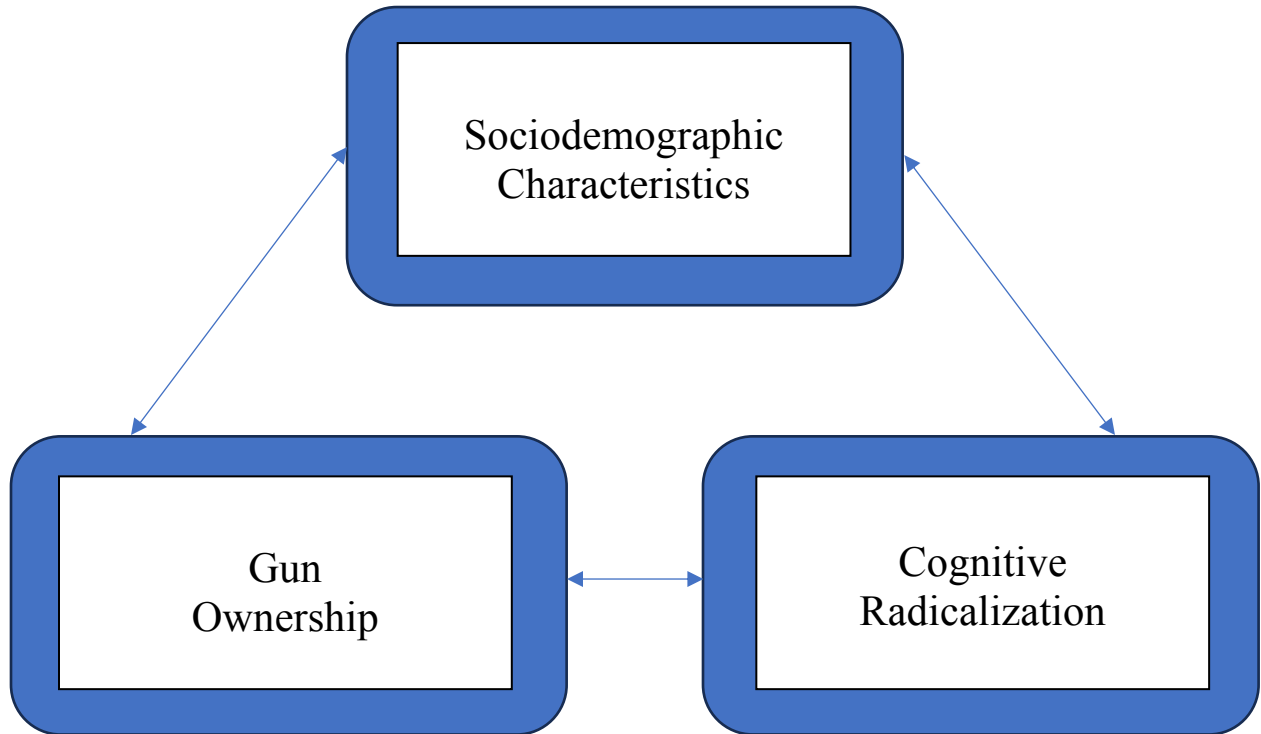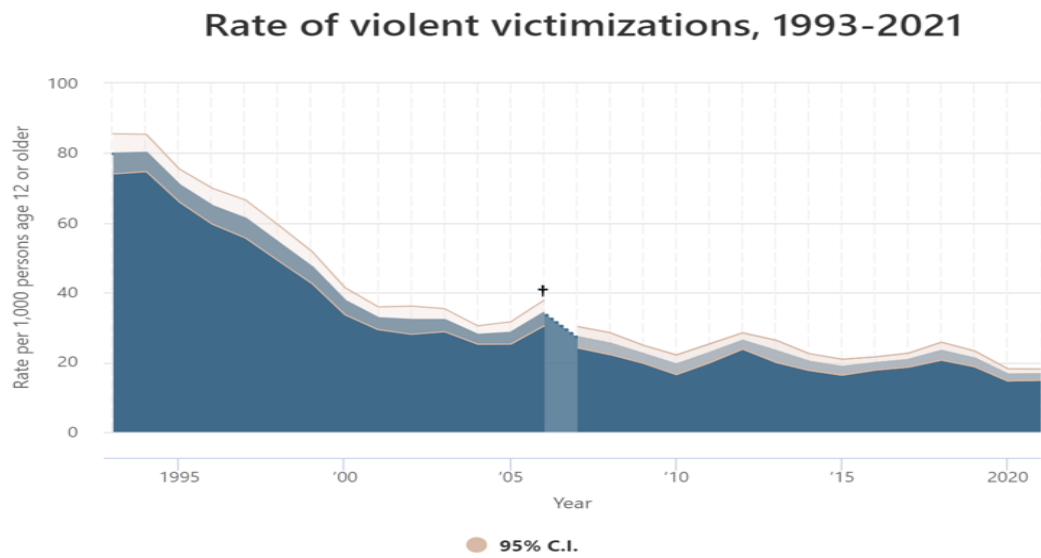
Figure 4
Conceptual Model

Figure 5
Rate of Violent Victimization 1993 – 2021

Rate of violent victimizations, 1993-2021

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

May 26, 2023 4:15:06 PM EDT

Richard Rogers
Cr Just & Cons Sciences 141212

Re: Exempt - Initial - 2023-306 PRRI Secondary Research on Violence and Gun Ownership

Dear Dr. Richard Rogers:

Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board has rendered the decision below for PRRI Secondary Research on Violence and Gun Ownership

Decision: Exempt

Selected Category: Category 4. Secondary research for which consent is not required: Secondary research uses of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens, if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(i) The identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens are publicly available;

(ii) Information, which may include information about biospecimens, is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, the investigator does not contact the subjects, and the investigator will not re-identify subjects;

(iii) The research involves only information collection and analysis involving the investigator's use of identifiable health information when that use is regulated under 45 CFR parts 160 and 164, subparts A and E, for the purposes of "health care operations" or "research" as those terms are defined at 45 CFR 164.501 or for "public health activities and purposes" as described under 45 CFR 164.512(b); or

(iv) The research is conducted by, or on behalf of, a Federal department or agency using government-generated or government-collected information obtained for nonresearch activities, if the research generates identifiable private information that is or will be maintained on information technology that is subject to and in compliance with section 208(b) of the E-Government Act of 2002, 44 U.S.C. 3501 note, if all of the identifiable private information collected, used, or generated as part of the activity will be maintained in systems of records subject to the Privacy Act of 1974, 5 U.S.C. 552a, and, if applicable, the information used in the research was collected subject to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, 44 U.S.C. 3501 et seq.

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the IRB.

Findings: The study aims to examine sociodemographic and ideological characteristics of gun owners and investigate correlations with statements about violence using the survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute through its Data Vault, e.g., American Values Survey and Social Network Survey. This data is public. This protocol meets the criteria of an exempt protocol, category #4.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,
Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board