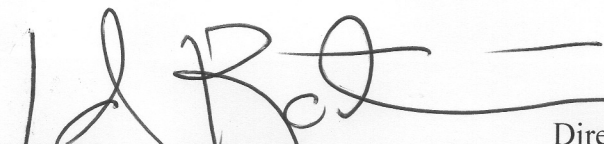


UNDER THE GUN: GUN VIOLENCE IN AMERICA – GRAPHIC DESIGN AS A
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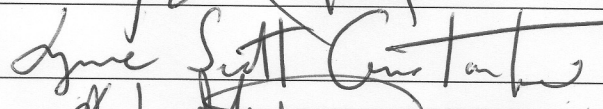
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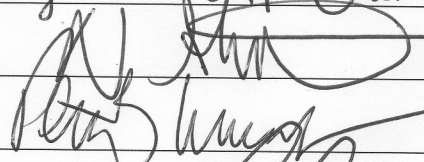
James X. Van Meer
A Thesis
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Fine Arts
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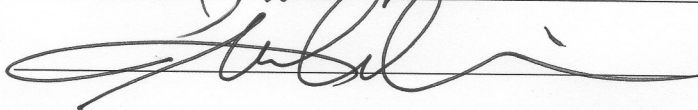
Committee:



Director







Director of the School of Art

Dean, College of Visual and
Performing Arts

Date:

April 4, 2017

Spring Semester 2017
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Under the Gun: Gun Violence in America – Graphic Design as a Reactive Catalyst of
Thought

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts in Art and Visual Technology.

by

James X. Van Meer
Bachelor of Arts
American University, 1977

Director: Jandos Rothstein, Associate Professor
Department of Graphic Design

Spring Semester 2017
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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DEDICATION

To my loving wife, Mary, and my wonderful son, Jim.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My gratitude runs deep.

I hope that this capstone project and exhibition for my MFA in Art and Visual Technology gives you pause and makes you think. I hope it makes you think about the subject at hand and how graphic design can be utilized to stir emotions, cause reactions, and be utilized to begin sane conversations. Gun violence in this country will never subside until we face the realities of what it's doing to us.

My journey to an MFA began forty years ago when I graduated from American University with a Bachelor of Arts in Design. I always wanted a Master's degree but could never find a program that suited me. Then I stumbled upon the answer by happenstance while attending my wife's college reunion at Rosemont College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There, in the school's bookstore, was a poster advertising a Master of Arts in Graphic Design at George Mason University.

My wife encouraged me to apply, so I looked into the details and figured I'd give it a try. I was accepted into the Master of Arts in Art and Visual Technology program with a concentration in Graphic Design and began my studies in the Fall of 2011. When the MFA in Art and Visual Technology program began in 2012 I was the first to take the plunge toward the terminal degree.

Today, in 2017, I'm getting my Master's, thanks in large part to you. There's not enough room to list everyone who has helped me reach this stage, but you know who you are. You're the folks who work behind the scenes to make sure every student at Mason has the best learning experience available. You're the folks who believe in people like me.

I am forever, and humbly, grateful to you all.

To my friends who have watched my journey through the lens of social media, thanks for your kind words and thoughts.

To my professors and fellow students, thank you for pushing me to do better and being there for me.

Special thanks to my committee—Jandos Rothstein, Don Starr, and Lynne Scott-Constantine. Your perceptive insights and sage advice kept my educational journey on course.

To my family, I give you my heartfelt thanks, especially my wife Mary, and my son Jim. You wouldn't let me give up or give in, no matter how big the challenges were. I love you and adore you both.

And thanks to Milly and “Big” Jim Van Meer, my mom and dad. I wish you were still with us and to see me reach my dream.

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ABSTRACT

UNDER THE GUN: GUN VIOLENCE IN AMERICA – GRAPHIC DESIGN AS A REACTIVE CATALYST OF THOUGHT

James X. Van Meer

George Mason University, 2017

Thesis Director: Jandos Rothstein

This final project and thesis describe gun violence in America through a statistical lens, emphasizing the implementation of graphic design to evoke a response from the audience. Advanced typography, grid design, vector theory and application, 3-D and environmental graphics, color theory, lighting design, and video have been employed in an attempt to bring the statistics to life and to engage audiences in sane conversation on a particularly volatile subject.

There are often visceral opposing views when the subject of guns, especially handguns, is brought up in modern American society. Studies are cited that show gun violence data, the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution is bandied about, and arguments ensue of whether guns kill people or people kill people. One side portends that the problem is exaggerated because responsible gun owners do not contribute to the

problem while the opposing side believes that gun violence is a serious public health threat, and the only safe gun is no gun at all.

Growing up in a family that owned guns (both handguns and rifles), my view of American gun violence was neither pro nor con for the longest time. I was raised in what I consider to be a normal, middle-class suburban environment. My father was a blue-collar worker, my mother worked as a legal secretary until the onset of health issues, and I attended elementary, middle, and high school in Rockville, Maryland. I grew up seeing President Kennedy assassinated, his brother Robert Kennedy slain, and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X gunned down. Never one to be involved in politics, I didn't pay much attention to the gun violence taking place in the 60s—I didn't live in that circle, so why should I care?

Then May 4, 1970 changed my view of guns. May 4th was a Monday, and it was the day that twenty-eight of the more than seventy Ohio National Guardsmen called to Kent State University fired their rifles and pistols into a crowd of student protesters, killing nine and injuring thirteen. The debate over cause and blame continues to this day, but one fact remains—a 13-second fusillade of bullets ruined lives and altered my belief system in ways I still have yet to fully comprehend.

Gun violence has touched me personally as well. I have a long-time friend who was shot in his workplace during an armed robbery. My friend almost died, and he changed in

ways I could not comprehend. I couldn't bring myself to imagine what he felt seeing the barrel of a handgun pointed at him, the searing hot pain of the shot, or the aftermath of a psyche cleaved by gun violence. I still can't fathom what he's been through.

For years I bounced back and forth on both sides of the gun debate fence. After my parents had retired to the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains in North Carolina, the family gun tradition continued. My dad owned a hunting rifle, a shotgun, and three pistols. Two of the guns were Christmas gifts from me—I walked into a gun store, filled out some forms, and walked out with the guns. Piece of cake.

My dad's guns were used for hunting and for self-protection. My folks lived in the country where just about everyone owned a gun, and the only time I can recall a handgun being fired was when a large, wild cat had come too close to the house. When my parents passed away I had the task of clearing out their possessions. Of course, I came across the guns, and after selling the handguns at a local gun shop, I brought the hunting rifle and shotgun back to my home in Virginia, eventually selling them to a friend, an avid hunter.

I didn't think about keeping any of my father's guns. I didn't want to have anything to do with them. And I still don't. They scare me because I know the destructive power that can be unleashed from them. It's that inherent destructive power and the toll that gun violence takes I am hoping to portray.

My final project and thesis are an attempt to allow people to see the cold-hard facts of gun violence in America and let them ponder the effects that guns have on this country. Through the use of interpretive graphics, storytelling, and experiential methods, it is my intent to further the dialogue about guns and gun violence through a thoughtful perspective.

Guns have the power to injure, the power to kill, the power to ruin lives. Does graphic design, as a catalyst for thought, have the power to alter views, or at the very least, lead to different perspectives? We'll never know unless we seed the conversation.

GUNS DON'T KILL PEOPLE. PEOPLE KILL PEOPLE. USING GUNS.

Under The Gun: Gun Violence in America – Graphic Design as a Catalyst of Thought

The statistics become overwhelming.

I'm convinced that America is at war with itself. It was May 14, 2016, and I was checking out the latest gun violence data online at GunViolenceArchive.org. I clicked on the "Last 72 Hours" tab and was taken to page after page of gun violence incidents that occurred across the United States over the past three days. The information for Friday, May 13th spanned just over two pages.¹

At the top of the list I saw an incident that took place in Roanoke, Virginia on Friday the 13th, sometime around 12:40 p.m. Details of the incident showed that Melissa Lynn Cook, 43, and Bobby Ray Cundiff, 40, were both shot dead, by each other, using two handguns. I noted the address—the 4400 block of Holmes Street, Northeast—and scooted over to Google Maps to see if I've been through the neighborhood during one of my long-ago trips to Roanoke.

I didn't recognize the area, but I did notice a haunting feature on the map. One block away from the shooting location is Monterey Elementary School. "Within sight" of the school, as the *Roanoke Times* put it in the linked story. The *Roanoke Times* goes on, stating, "Classes at the school were not interrupted by the shooting," according to school spokesman Justin McLeod.²

I am both amazed and appalled.

I am not only amazed and appalled by the carnage I have been exposing myself to day after day during my research, but also by the blatant disregard we as a nation seem to have for what guns are doing to us. Two people killed by each other during a domestic dispute, in an almost Wild West shootout scenario, and life goes on as usual.

Another day, another shooting. Nothing to see here, folks. Please go about your business.

As I continue to comb through the seemingly endless stories of gun violence I tend to glaze over at the statistics. To me, it's the same old story played out the same old way with the same old arguments. Only the numbers change.

We shudder at the carnage, but do we really pause and consider what gun violence does to this country every single day? Do we consider the economic impact of lives shattered by gun violence? Do we recognize the hidden psychological scars inflicted upon us by

the violence that surrounds us? Do we perhaps consider ourselves to be one step away from being in the crosshairs as well?

These are tough questions with no easy answers. When we contemplate how we, as individuals, fit into the debate, we need to study our reactions to not only gun violence, but to guns themselves.

Guns create visceral arguments between family members, political factions, and strangers on the street. Gun violence cuts across racial, gender, and regional boundaries. Gun violence has created schisms in the U.S. as our sanity as a nation is questioned around the world.

The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution seems to have been hijacked by the National Rifle Association (NRA) and is used as a rallying cry for funding and membership, while we as a nation argue over the meaning of a militia, what “well regulated” means, the rights of *all* people, and just what the framers of the Constitution were inferring when they penned those 27 words.

In the 2007 case *District of Columbia et al. v. Heller*, the United States Supreme Court held that the Second Amendment “protects an individual right to possess a firearm unconnected with service in a militia, and to use that arm for traditionally lawful purposes, such as self-defense within the home.” The Court also upheld an often-

overlooked portion of the decision, in that, “Like most rights, the Second Amendment right is not unlimited. It is not a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any manner whatsoever and for whatever purpose: For example, concealed weapons prohibitions have been upheld under the Amendment or state analogues. The Court’s opinion should not be taken to cast doubt on longstanding prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms.”³

Gun violence has become so ingrained, so culturally normal, that we tend to skim over the news of it. Sure, we may “tsk-tsk” at the reports of a child shot to death on a playground, but we never seem to get past the single number. It’s one child in one location in one incident. It’s not until we hear of a mass shooting like Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut or the Pulse nightclub massacre in Orlando, Florida that we seem to notice what is happening around us. And even then it seems the shock of the act wears off after a few news cycles.

It appears we don’t see the picture as a whole.

Maybe it's because the picture is so big it's hard to comprehend. When we decipher the statistics, it's still difficult to envision what the numbers really mean, especially from a psychological perspective. What would your reaction be if you discovered that six of the twelve deadliest shootings in the U.S. have happened from 2007 onward?⁴

And what do you think when you discover that the massacre at the historic Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina doesn't make it into the top ten list of shooting incidents?⁵

Would you react differently if you saw it up close and personal? Would you rethink your stance, would you recognize another's point of view, or would you "stick to your guns," per se, and double down on the rhetoric that spews from both sides? Could you begin to absorb the statistics in a better way if they were presented to you differently? Would the numbers take on new meaning if they were in your face?

That's what this treatise is about. It's putting some of the cold, hard facts out there in a visual and experiential manner. It's an expression of personal preferences, personal accounts, and personal beliefs I don't often voice, especially in a public setting. It's an exercise geared toward exploring reactions and furthering dialogue through interpretive design.

Under The Gun is a story about gun violence in America, and how graphic design, perhaps, can be used as a reactive catalyst of thought. Since it's impossible for me to present all of the data I have uncovered, and it's impossible for me to present the latest data, I will present what I can in the hope you can reach your own conclusions.

Consider the statistics and the statements I have put before you. Contemplate what gun violence has done and is doing. Examine what I am presenting.

See the picture as a whole—and think about it.

Do you feel under the gun?

On Friday, July 8, 2016, Connecticut Governor Dannel P. Malloy visited a street memorial at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Governor Malloy endured during the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, and had come to Orlando pay his respects. Following his visit to the memorial, Governor Malloy said, “What happened at Pulse was a truly devastating moment for the nation. To visit there personally, you think about the individuals who held their breath in fear inside that building, knowing a madman was nearby. You think about the horror they must have felt—a horror no person should have to experience. You think about the parents and family-members who woke up to the tragic news that their loved ones would not come home—and the pain that will make their hearts swell forever. It fills you with emotion.”

Governor Malloy went on to say, “The wounds in Orlando and across the nation are still raw. These are challenging times—gun violence is simply taking too many lives. We must never forget. My prayers continue to be with the victims and their families.”⁶

ONE DAY

27 STATES • 69 CITIES • 29 KILLED • 51 INJURED

Roanoke • Virginia Beach • Toledo • Oakwood • Stockbridge • Palm Beach Gardens •
Washington, DC • Pittsburgh • Westlake • Manchester • Laconia • Lorain • Memphis •
Brandon • New Orleans • Winter Garden • Orange Park • Las Vegas • Memphis • Boston
• Jackson • Fall River • Columbus • Bean Station • Evanston • Cleveland • Bridgeport •
Louisville • Norfolk • Indianapolis • Peoria • Port Saint Lucie • Bakersfield • Tempe •
Phoenix • Goodyear • Chicago • Pontiac • Ann Arbor • Memphis • Birmingham • New
Orleans • Union • Brooklyn • New York City • Los Angeles • Wilkes Barre • Yonkers •
Detroit • Peoria • Houston • Tulare • Greenville • San Antonio • Fort Wayne • Evansville
• Branson • Redfield • Central Islip • Babylon • Fall River • West Babylon • Greensboro •
Harpers Ferry • Whitmer • Oklahoma City • Billings

Alabama • Arizona • California • Connecticut • D.C. • Florida • Georgia • Illinois •
Indiana • Kentucky • Massachusetts • Michigan • Missouri • Montana • Nevada • New
Hampshire • New Jersey • New York • North Carolina • Ohio • Oklahoma • Pennsylvania
• South Carolina • Tennessee • Texas • Virginia • West Virginia

The U.S. cities and states where guns killed people on May 13, 2016.⁷

6 DEGREES OF GUNS

I know you and you know me

Funny how we're all intertwined with guns.

It was a pleasant, sunny Saturday morning. I was working on my MFA final project and exhibition when I decided to take a break and glance at my Facebook feed.

There at the top of my feed was a post from Glen Battle, an old high school classmate. Glen's posts usually include pictures of his family, so I couldn't quite grasp what I was looking at when I scanned his post.

"Heard shots Thursday night," Glen had written. "Washed car this morning and found these 9mm shells. God help us all." I was stunned. Before me was more evidence pointing to my belief that virtually every American is probably touched by gun violence at some point in their life, either personally or through an acquaintance.

I started thinking about how gun violence in this country has touched my friends, my family, and me. I recalled how I've been connected to guns and gun violence, even though I don't own a gun.

I began to ponder the six degrees of separation theory, wondering if it applied to gun violence (weirdly, it seems the six degrees is shrinking due to our Internet-connected world).⁸ I thought back to the times in my life I became intimate with gun violence.

I thought of Glen's post—my friend wanders across gun violence as he goes to wash his car. I recalled my lifelong pal, Earl Carter, who ended up getting shot during a robbery. I spoke with Earl and during our conversation he reminded me that his younger brother had committed suicide by gun.

I remembered the time my father was robbed at gunpoint while working as a store clerk. He was locked in the store's cooler while the robber emptied the cash drawer. He quit the job that evening.

I reflected on the time I was shot in the neck while I was driving. Turns out the person who shot me was a young kid who had stolen a BB gun from a sporting goods store. I remembered telling the police where I saw him. I'm amazed the cops didn't kill him. I'm amazed because he was black.

I thought back to the time not so long ago when someone was murdered in my neighborhood, and the killer lived three doors down from me, in bucolic Burke, Virginia.

For me, it's the six degrees of separation theory come to life, but it's a connection made through guns and gun violence.

I try to envision what Glen must think, what he must be pondering, and I can't. Glen is black, and I am white. I follow his Facebook feed and see him trying to espouse his views about gun violence, especially blacks being shot by white police officers, and watch as a white friend opposes his views, berating him about more whites being killed by cops than blacks. I post some facts on Glen's behalf (more whites are killed by cops, yet blacks are killed in a much more disproportionate number)⁹ and his friend starts arguing with me.

I withdraw from the conversation on Facebook (don't feed the trolls, as they say) and continue my research. While the facts show that blacks are disproportionately shot by cops, the facts also show that gun deaths vary greatly by type.

A Brookings Institution study shows that 77% of white gun deaths are suicides, and less than one in five (19%) are homicides. But when you look at the same categories for blacks, the numbers show a completely polar opposite. Only 14% of black gun deaths are due to suicide, while the gun homicide rate is 82%.¹⁰

The gun violence statistics paint a different picture of what it's like to grow up black in America. As a white man I can't fathom what it's like—I can only read and listen to my friend's stories.

I speak with a work colleague one morning after another incident of an unarmed black man being killed by police. She is black, as is her husband, and she tells me when they saw the news report of the incident, she told her husband, “Keep your black ass away from the windows,” to not even peek through the blinds of their home. “I’m afraid if someone sees he’s black, they’ll shoot him,” she said.¹¹ If perception is reality, then this is a black man’s reality in America in 2016.

The six degrees theory keeps coming back to me. It seems to me that if you know someone who is black, then you know someone who is affected by gun violence. Chances are, you probably know someone who owns a gun or is closely connected to guns. It's the six degrees of separation theory come to life for you.

It's become extremely difficult to get away from or ignore the gun violence that surrounds society in this country.

Like Glen, all you have to do is look around you.

1 OUT OF 1,856

Four or more

Ana Marlen Cruz-Franco died at home.

She was getting her 9-year old daughter and her 6-year old and 4-year old sons ready for church when her neighbor, Ian Trevor Sherrod, entered her mobile home in Tarboro, North Carolina, shooting her and killing her.¹²

Ana was just one of 1,856 mass shooting victims in the U.S. during 2015.¹³ Her husband, Ventura Sanchez, died the next day from his injuries—he was shot by Sherrod as well, as he sat in his vehicle outside his home. The children were not harmed. The 9-year old daughter was able to call for help.¹⁴

The first person Sherrod shot and killed was George Dickens, Jr., at the Master's Touch Barber Shop in Tarboro. Later, officers located Sherrod in a parking garage, where he confronted police and was shot dead.

James E. Holmes was convicted of 24 counts of first-degree murder and 140 counts of attempted murder in the July 20, 2012 movie theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado. Holmes' psychiatrist, Lynne Fenton of the University of Colorado, had forewarned colleagues he could be a danger to others, but Holmes began the process of withdrawing from the university before action could be taken.¹⁵

After an investigation, the mass shooting perpetrated by Ian Trevor Sherrod was linked to paranoid schizophrenia by authorities. Does that mean that all mass shootings are linked to mental illness issues? In their commentary in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, "Challenging the Political Assumption That Guns Don't Kill People, Crazy People Kill People!," authors Heath J. Hodges and Mario J. Scalora concluded, "Firearms continue to feature prominently in violence, both fatal and nonlethal. Legislation has targeted persons with mental illness in an effort to manage this form of harm since the 1960s. In the wake of high profile mass shootings by individuals with mental illness, recent reforms have proposed a tightening on these restrictions. Yet, an examination of the research reveals that the base rate for violence among this population is low and that mental illness explains a small share of violence relative to other risk factors. Prevalence rates specific to firearm violence among psychiatric samples are scarce, but preliminary evidence suggests it may be rare and calls into question whether mental illness presents a unique risk for this form of violence."¹⁶

“We know that many mass shooters are young white men with acute mental health issues. The problem is, such broad traits do little to help threat assessment teams identify who will actually attack. Legions of young men love violent movies or first-person shooter games, get angry about school, jobs, or relationships, and suffer from mental health afflictions. The number who seek to commit mass murder is tiny. Decades of research have shown that the link between mental disorders and violent behavior is small and not useful for predicting violent acts. (People with severe mental disorders are in fact far more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators.)”¹⁷

The definition of a mass shooting is an incident of gun violence in which four or more people are shot (not necessarily killed), and which may include the shooter.¹⁸

The Mass Shooting Tracker website listed 371 such shootings in the U.S. during 2015. Totals from the 371 mass shootings in 2015 show that 1,387 people were injured in a mass shooting incident and survived the shooting, while 469 died from the incident.¹⁹ Ana Marlen Cruz-Franco was one of those who died.

The man responsible for the Tarboro mass shooting was mentally ill, according to an official statement. “After completing several search warrants, conducting numerous interviews and examining medical records from various health care facilities, investigators determined that Sherrod had struggled with mannerisms indicative of paranoid

schizophrenia within recent years. The symptoms of his illness appear to have manifested in recent weeks, culminating into the delusional behavior witnessed on the morning of the shootings.”²⁰

Mental illness and mass shootings have been tied recently as political factions discuss gun control legislation. Current U.S. federal law prohibits people who have been involuntarily committed because of mental illness from purchasing guns, so there is legislation on the books. But some states have been slow to submit records to the national database.²¹

Was the Tarboro mass shooting due to mental illness or due to the preponderance of guns? Or perhaps, was it both?

EVERY 16 MINUTES

The daily tally

Someone dies from gun violence in the U.S. every 16 minutes.

That rate adds up to 90 people per day, of all ages.²²

31 are murdered

56 kill themselves

2 are killed unintentionally

1 is killed by police intervention

1 intent is unknown

90 deaths per day over the course of one year equals 32,850 people killed by gun violence ($90 \times 365 = 32,850$).

Gun violence deaths and motor vehicle traffic deaths are just about the same. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that, in 2014, 33,804 people died in motor vehicle traffic deaths while 33,736 died from firearms.²³

Motor vehicle manufacturers must follow health and safety regulations established by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration,²⁴ while firearms manufacturers do not need to meet any such regulations.²⁵

Which begs the question—if firearm manufacturers had to follow health and safety regulations, could they somehow manufacture a “safe” gun?

Some say there is no such thing as a safe gun, while others believe guns can be made safer.²⁶ No matter what, people will continue to buy cars and people will continue to die in car accidents. People will continue to buy guns and people will continue to die by gun violence.

It’s just the way it is. Or is it?

90 PEOPLE DIE FROM GUN VIOLENCE EVERY DAY IN THE U.S.

12 STATS, ZERO ANSWERS

Haunted by statistics

What is wrong with us?

People thought that after the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, America would get its act together and address the overwhelming gun violence issue in this country. Didn't we pause and say we'd all take a sober, inward peek at our psyches and make the declaration that, yeah, maybe it doesn't make sense to sell assault-style weapons to people, no matter what their mental state at the moment of purchase?

So how did Adam Lanza amass an arsenal of assault-style weapons so he could storm into Sandy Hook on December 14, 2012, and shoot dead 20 children and six staff members?²⁷ And why in the three years after that did 555 children under the age of 12 die from gunshots—both intentional and accidental?²⁸

These are just some of the statistics that have come to haunt me while doing my research. I have mixed typography, color, size, style, and media in an attempt to stimulate thought about what the numbers portray and what they may reveal.

My research has revealed hundreds, if not thousands, of statistics on gun violence—how it affects society, how it affects our economy, and how it shapes our world.

Some of the statistics flummox me, especially that 555 children lost their lives to gun violence in a three-year span. I keep asking why, but I can't find a logical answer.

“Our right to peaceful assembly—that right was robbed from moviegoers in Aurora and Lafayette. Our unalienable right to life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—those rights were stripped from college students in Blacksburg and Santa Barbara, and from high schoolers at Columbine, and from first-graders in Newtown. First-graders. And from every family who never imagined that their loved one would be taken from our lives by a bullet from a gun.”²⁹ – President Barack Obama

THE STATS TELL AN INCOMPLETE STORY

357 MILLION: There are now more guns than people in the United States.

Adding up new guns and imports and subtracting gun exports, in 2013 there would have been roughly 357,000,000 firearms in the U.S.—40 million more guns than people. This is just an estimate. These numbers are blind to firearms that enter and exit the country illegally, and to guns that break down, or are lost or destroyed. In 2009, according to the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), gun

makers produced 5.6 million guns. By 2013 their annual production had just about doubled, up to 10.9 million guns that year.³⁰

42 COPS: 42 police officers were shot and killed in the U.S. during 2015.

That number is much lower than the 156 officers who were shot and killed in 1973. In 2015, twelve Texas officers were killed, eleven died in Georgia, nine in Louisiana, and six in both California and New York. Thirty-three states lost at least one officer to gun violence in 2015.³¹

991 KILLED: Police shot 991 people dead in the U.S. during 2015.

949 were males, 42 were females. The majority (495) were White, while 258 were Black, and 172 were Hispanic. 66 were other or unknown races. 782 of the people killed were in possession of a deadly weapon. 251, or about 25%, showed signs of mental illness.³²

6,410 WOMEN: Between 2001 and 2012, 6,410 women were murdered in the United States by an intimate partner using a gun.

Women in the United States are 11 times more likely to be murdered with a gun than are women in other high-income countries.³³

20% OWN 65%: 20% of U.S. gun owners own 65% of the nation's guns.

A study published in the *Injury Prevention Journal*, based on a 2004 National Firearms Survey, found that 20% of the gun owners with the most firearms possessed about 65% of the nation's guns.³⁴

6 TIMES: Female veterans die by suicide nearly six times the rate as those with no service record because of one reason. They use guns.

“One reason is that female veterans are more comfortable with firearms—it’s part of the culture,” says Caitlin Thompson, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs’ deputy director for suicide prevention. Mental health experts at the VA are reaching out to former servicewomen to talk about gun safety. The female veterans’ suicide rate is also surprising because men generally are far more likely than women to die by suicide.³⁵

THE NUMBERS CHANGE CONSTANTLY

31 COLLEGES: 31 U.S. college campuses experienced gun violence during 2015.

Results from a *Campus Safety* opinion survey showed that one in four campuses are not prepared to respond to an active shooter. In Virginia, firearms can be carried openly on college campuses, with or without a permit, but an institution can prohibit open carry in its buildings and dormitories. Gun violence on college campuses is defined as incidents where a gun was fired without injury, a suicide by gun was attempted or completed, or a gun was used resulting in injury or death.³⁶

1 PER WEEK: More Americans were killed by toddlers in 2015 than were killed by terrorists.

The Washington Post counted 58 total toddler-involved shootings as of December 17, 2015, or a little more than one shooting a week. In 19 of those instances, toddlers shot and killed themselves, and in two others toddlers shot and killed other individuals. That brought the total of toddler-involved shooting deaths in the U.S. in 2015 to 21. Counting both the Chattanooga, Tennessee military installations shootings on July 16, 2015 (5 killed) and the San Bernardino shootings on December 2, 2015 (14 killed) as instances of terrorism, 19 Americans were killed in instances of suspected, reported, or potential terrorism in 2015. Counting American victims of the November 2015 Paris attacks brings that number up to 20. Even using the broadest leeway in counting U.S. victims of terrorism leads to the same mathematical conclusion: More Americans were shot and killed by toddlers in 2015 than were killed by terrorists.³⁷

2 SECONDS: You're a cop. You come upon a kid who points a gun at you. Do you shoot?

In 2015, police officers in the U.S. killed at least 28 people holding BB or pellet guns comparable to the one Tamir Rice was carrying when he was shot in Cleveland, Ohio in November of 2014. Rice was shot within two seconds of police arriving on the scene. Studies show that police officers have an average response and action time of approximately 1.96 seconds to perceive, analyze, and evaluate the situation before them, draw their weapon from their holster, and fire it.³⁸

\$229 BILLION: Gun violence costs the U.S. economy about \$229 billion every year.

The costs include \$8.6 billion in direct expenses for services like emergency and medical care. \$229 billion divided among every man, woman, and child in the United States works out to more than \$700 per person.³⁹

555 GONE: That's the number of kids 12 and under killed by firearms in the three years after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

When Adam Lanza stormed into the school in Newtown, Connecticut, on December 14, 2012, he shot dead 20 children and six staff members. Between December 15, 2012 and December 14, 2015, 555 children under the age of 12 died from gunshots—both intentional and accidental—according to an NBC News analysis.⁴⁰

50% BLACK: About half of all people murdered by guns in the U.S. are black men.

Though they only make up 6% of the U.S. population, black Americans are murdered by firearms at a far higher rate than all other races.⁴¹

Gun violence touches every segment of our society. It increases the probability of deaths in incidents of domestic violence, raises the likelihood of fatalities by those who intend to injure others and among those who attempt suicide, places children and young people at special risk, and disproportionately affects communities of color.

The United States experiences epidemic levels of gun violence, claiming over 30,000 lives annually, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For every person who dies from a gunshot wound, two others are wounded. Every year, approximately 100,000 Americans are victims of gun violence. In addition to those who are killed or injured, there are countless others whose lives are forever changed by the deaths of and injuries to their loved ones.

Mass shooting tragedies like the school shootings at Virginia Tech in April 2007 and Northern Illinois University in February 2008—or the 1993 office shooting in San Francisco that led to the formation of the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence—receive significant media attention. However, gun deaths and injuries in the U.S. usually occur quietly, without national press coverage, every day.⁴²

Sometimes you need to let the numbers speak for themselves.

OVER 30,000 EVERY YEAR

The size of the problem

It's hard to wrap your mind around the numbers.

33,686 people were killed by gun violence in 2013. That's more people than the entire population of the City of Ithaca, New York, home to Cornell University.⁴³ Let that sink in for a second. It's equal to wiping the entire population of Ithaca off the map.

How to show the enormity of the statistic? Let a quarter-inch square represent one life lost. Repeat that quarter-inch square a quarter-inch apart both horizontally and vertically, 33,686 times. You end up with enough quarter-inch squares to span a wall ten feet wide and eight feet high.

That's how immense the problem is.

And if wiping Ithaca off the map isn't enough to show you what gun violence is doing to this country, process this: Between 2001 and 2013, there were 406,496 American deaths on U.S. soil compared to 3,380 total American deaths due to terrorism.⁴⁴

33,636 people died from gun violence in the United States in 2013.⁴⁵

If each death is represented by one quarter-inch square, and each square is spaced a quarter-inch apart both horizontally and vertically, it takes almost 80 square feet of space to illustrate 33,686 deaths.

As I search for answers I only end up asking more questions. As I do background research I only discover more shocking statistics, each one seemingly more disturbing than the last. I read countless narratives on gun violence—news stories, blogs, reports, databases, journal entries, social media accounts—and I see a pattern. It seems we're stuck in a cycle. Some people claim to know the answers, some plead for sanity, some cajole with rhetoric, and some make impassioned speeches. Yet the results remain the same. Americans are dying at an alarming rate from gun violence.

Gun violence is taking an exorbitant toll on this country. It is ruining lives. It is wreaking havoc on society. It is leaving people scarred, both mentally and physically. It is burying itself in our collective psyche. It is making us fear each other.

Gun advocates promote an agenda that reinforces the gun violence fear factor. Every time there is a mass shooting in the United States, gun sales go up. After the Pulse nightclub massacre in Orlando, Florida, gun sales surged by about 40%, partially because the NRA and politicians reignited self-defense fears in the American public.⁴⁶

As NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre said during a press conference one week after the Sandy Hook shooting, “The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun.”⁴⁷

Tell that to Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings, whose city suffered a massive firefight and massacre on July 7, 2016. As Dallas police were protecting a peaceful protest, Micah Xavier Johnson ambushed them, killing five officers and injuring nine others.⁴⁸

Twenty to thirty of the marchers were openly carrying AR-15s and other military-style weapons, as is their legal right under Texas state law.⁴⁹ With so many guns around, officers did not know where the shooting was coming from. Said the mayor, “In the middle of a firefight it’s hard to pick out the good guys and the bad guys.”⁵⁰

Every single year, more than 30,000 Americans have their lives cut short by guns—30,000. Suicides. Domestic violence. Gang shootouts. Accidents. Hundreds of thousands of Americans have lost brothers and sisters, or buried their own children. Many have had to learn to live with a disability, or learned to live without the love of their life.⁵¹

– President Barack Obama –

20 YEARS OF NOTHING

“With approximately 30,000 men, women and children dying each year at the barrel of a gun in elementary schools, movie theaters, workplaces, houses of worship and on live television, the United States faces a public health crisis of gun violence.”⁵²

– AMA President Steven J. Stack, M.D.

Dr. Stack’s June 14, 2016 statement fell on the heels of the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida on June 12, 2016. One may think that, if gun violence were declared a public health crisis, the U.S. government would do all in its power to address it. But you’d be surprised.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control received funding to research gun violence through the latter part of the 90s, but when the NRA got wind of it, they lobbied Congress to eliminate its funding. And the NRA won.⁵³

In 1996, Congress stripped the funding for gun violence research from the Center’s budget and enacted a measure (the Dickey Amendment, named after its sponsor, then-Rep. Jay Dickey [R-Ga.]) to prevent the CDC from spending money “to advocate or promote gun control.”

So for the past twenty years the CDC has refused to study gun violence unless it receives specific appropriations to do the work. And Congress refuses to fund anything related to it.

Speaking to the *Los Angeles Times*, Mark Rosenberg, a gun violence expert said, “The result is that the CDC basically does nothing in gun violence research. If research on cancer were stopped for a single day, there would be a huge protest. But this research has been stopped for twenty years.”⁵⁴

2 ARMED MALES

This is not a test

The text message made my heart stop.

George Mason University police had sent a Mason Alert at 2:44 p.m. on Thursday, September 22, 2016 warning of two males near the Fairfax campus carrying assault-style weapons. The text message stated to check email for more information.

As I fumbled with my phone trying to open my email, I could feel my heart pounding. It was about three minutes after my phone had buzzed with the text message, and I didn't see an email about the alert. I started to panic.

My phone buzzed. It was an email from one of my students saying he had received the alert and was bailing out of class that evening. It was too risky to him. I sent an email to my class, canceling that evening's session. No way was I headed to campus if there was a report that two armed males had been spotted near campus. Not after what happened at Virginia Tech.

Over ten minutes later, at 2:55 p.m., I got an email from Mason Alert.

“University Police are seeking two males, one white, one African-American, near the Field House on the Fairfax Campus. Witnesses observed these two individuals carrying assault rifle styled weapons. They were last seen near the Robinson Square Apartments. Police are on scene actively looking for these two individuals. Please remain away from the Robinson Square Apartments and report any individuals matching this description to University Police at (703) 993-2810.”⁵⁵

I quickly opened my Google Maps app to see where the Robinson Square Apartments were. I found the Field House, but my search of the area turned up nothing for Robinson Square Apartments. I had heard of a couple of buildings on campus named Robinson, but I didn’t recall them being apartments. So where were the gunmen? Was the campus on lock-down? Was this an active shooter situation? What was happening?

A couple of students emailed me and thanked me for caring for their safety and well-being, but I was just as concerned about mine as theirs.

Ever since starting my MFA program at Mason I’ve considered what to do and how to react should an active shooter situation occur while in class. My thoughts about campus shootings have become ever more pronounced, considering I’m an adjunct professor on the Fairfax campus two nights per week. I’ve given thought on more than one occasion that my students and I are sitting ducks in the classroom where my course is held.

The award-winning Art and Design Building on George Mason's Fairfax campus was designed for artists, not protection from gun violence.

It's open and airy, filled with natural light. Room 1020, where I teach, has a bank of floor to ceiling windows on one side. The entry door is a sidelight style, with the door being solid wood and the adjacent panel being glass. Any gunman can walk along the sidewalk outside of the building and open fire, or if they're marching down the hallway, just break the sidelight glass and create carnage. Even if the door were shut, they could break the glass, reach in, and turn the handle to gain entry. It's not a room one thinks of escaping to in an attempt to hide.

Why do I think about all this? Because my heightened sense of self-protection and situational awareness went off the charts in October 2002.

October 2, 2002 was the start of the infamous D.C. sniper attacks. During a month-long shooting spree, John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo killed ten people and injured three, leaving the greater metropolitan D.C. area terror-stricken.⁵⁶

From October 2nd, when the first shots rang out, to October 24th when the pair were found and arrested, the city and suburbs trembled in fear and lived in angst.

People were afraid to leave curtains open in their homes and scared stiff to stop for gasoline for fear of being killed. News reports told of people being shot and killed in the parking lot of a Home Depot in Falls Church, Virginia, and one man being mowed down in a Fredericksburg, Virginia Exxon station while pumping gas.

Bulletins were issued for citizens to be on the lookout for a white van, so everyone in town was suspicious of white vans and white box trucks. There was a collective sense of looking for a needle in a haystack, seeing that the D.C. area is filled with white work vans and box trucks. When Muhammad and Malvo were caught, police discovered they had perpetrated their crimes in a modified 1990 Chevy Caprice, dark blue in color.⁵⁷

It seemed like everyone who lived in the area during October 2002 was traumatized. Many people suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and didn't realize it. There was a heightened sense of vulnerability that sustained itself over three weeks, resulting in significant social shocks and increased economic hardships as people missed work, stayed away from open spaces, and avoided contact with their communities for fear of being shot.⁵⁸

It was god-awful in October 2002. A year earlier D.C. had endured 9/11, and now snipers were on the prowl. I recall the keen sense of dread that overcame me every time I stepped out the door. I look back on that time in retrospect and realize how my senses of sight and hearing were piqued to their highest levels. I'm reminded of the eerie quiet I would

experience every time I had to pull into a gas station for gas, flinching at the sound of a truck accelerating, or the loud bang of a car door being closed, thinking it was a gunshot.

I'd watch people hiding behind gas pumps, their eyes darting furtively around, trying to figure out the line of sight a shooter might take. I'd make eye contact with another person, and we'd both give each other a look, a look as if to say, "Are you the guy?"

It was awful. When it was over, it truly can be said the area breathed a collective sigh of relief. It can also be said that the people who lived through the incident experienced terror on a personal level that will live with them for ages.

But that terror can't compare to what almost three dozen people went through on April 16, 2007.

That was the day that Seung-Hui Cho, a senior at Virginia Tech, went on a shooting rampage at a four-story coed dorm on campus and ended up at Norris Hall, the university's engineering science and mechanics building. By the time Cho was discovered dead by a self-inflicted gunshot, he had killed 32 students and faculty, which remains the record for the worst campus shooting in U.S. history.⁵⁹

The school sent out an email statement at 9:26 a.m. that day, stating a shooting had taken place at West Ambler Johnston Hall earlier in the morning. Then, at 9:45 a.m., 911 calls

started flooding in, reporting a second round of shootings taking place at Norris Hall. At 9:50 a.m. another email was sent alerting students that a gunman was loose on campus and they should “stay put.” Over an hour later, at 10:53 a.m., students received an email regarding the Norris Hall shooting, wherein the subject line announced a second shooting and that “police have one gunman in custody.”⁶⁰

Looking back on those events now, I can see why I was quick to make the call to cancel class the day I received a Mason text alert. The alert told me there were two armed men near Mason’s Fairfax campus. In the throes of chaos caused by the lack of information about the situation, I preferred to err on the side of safety.

The question begs—has anything changed after the massacre at Virginia Tech? In 2011, the Virginia Supreme Court issued a ruling that allowed public institutions to create gun restriction regulations tailored to that institution, including weapons carried by people with concealed carry permits, but only in areas where people may congregate or are the most vulnerable. The ruling still allows for gun possession on open grounds of state institution campuses, but in many cases, as it is at George Mason University, guns are not allowed within the school’s buildings.⁶¹ The Supreme Court ruling itself was based upon a complaint originally brought against George Mason University.⁶²

You would think that with this knowledge, and with the placid nature of George Mason’s Fairfax campus, I would be less apprehensive and more comfortable while on campus.

But I find I can't quite reach that stage, one of pure trust and 100% commitment to my teaching duties while in the classroom. It's partially due to the psychological scars I bear from my contact with gun violence and my fear of who may be the next person to snap and open fire without warning or provocation.

It's also partially due to the fact that we live in a society where our collective response to battling gun violence is to brand it with a tagline of "Run. Hide. Fight." Referred to as an "active shooter event," the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has issued a document that addresses what to do in case someone is "killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area."⁶³

The three steps DHS spells out are: Run from the scene, hide from the shooter, and if all else fails, fight the shooter. Even municipalities have gotten into the act. As part of their "Ready Houston" campaign, the City of Houston produced a graphic six-minute video about what to do in the case of an active shooter. The video has garnered over 5.5 million views from around the world on YouTube alone.⁶⁴

Is gun violence so prevalent in our society that we've reduced our reactions to a pamphlet or a video? Is the government trying to tell us we should get used to it?

The day I got the alert of possible gunmen on campus was the day I saw my MFA project and thesis come to life before me in real time. All during my research I found myself in

the midst of trying to express the raw, gut-wrenching, emotional feeling that correlates with gun violence, and now here I was feeling petrified and powerless. Much like I feel when I take a pause and think, “What would I do if someone starts shooting in the Art and Design building?”

I don’t have a good answer to that question. It’s hypothetical to me. Sure, I’d try to get my students and myself out as fast as possible and run to safety, but I’ve no clear plan of how to go about that. The classroom I spend most of my time in doesn’t have many, if any, hiding places per se, so the “hide” option seems a bit chancy.

So it’s most likely we’ll be left with two of three options should an active shooter event occur in the building. We either run or fight, however the situation unfolds.

Can I foresee an active shooter event ever happening at Mason? Maybe. But I pray all the time that it never does, and it never will, ever again, at any school. It’s not what college is about. It’s not what life is about.

Note: The armed men near George Mason’s campus turned out to be ROTC students on exercise. Seems communications got mixed up, and there never was any real threat.⁶⁵

30 YEARS SHATTERED

Earl, interrupted

It was just a normal night.

Or at least that's what Earl Carter thought. It was Friday, January 10, 1986, and he was going about his business managing the Little Falls Mall Safeway in Bethesda, Maryland. It was around 9:40 p.m. and Earl was making preparations to close the store for the night. In fact, he had volunteered to close the store that evening because nobody else wanted to.

"The store that I had worked at was being robbed on a regular basis, on the third Friday of each month, at 9:30 at night," he recalled. "Even though the store was going to be staked out by Montgomery County Police that night, nobody wanted to close. I said, 'I'll close the store.' This is a professional robber—he takes the money, and he runs. 'I will close.'"

It was forecast to be a cold evening, dipping down into the 20s and 30s.⁶⁶ Earl had taken most of the cash from the registers and made a night deposit, so there was little money left in the store. "It was just a normal night."

Earl had spoken with a uniformed police officer earlier in the evening, and understood that the police were staking out the shopping center due to the rash of robberies. Earl told the cops he felt safe because they were in the vicinity.

But Earl's feeling of safety was soon shattered when the robber, wearing a homemade mask, jumped up on one of the check stand's conveyor belts by the manager's "cage," pointed a gun at Earl, and plopped a grocery bag down on the counter.

Neither one said anything. "There was that instant social contract between us. I had seen all the Old West movies; I think I immediately put my hands up like you see in those movies," Earl recounted. "He reached over and laid the bag over the top of the cage. I took the bag, and I almost laughed because it was a different grocery store's bag."

With no words between them, Earl opened the cash drawer and dropped a \$5 bill, a \$10 bill, and a \$20 bill into the bag. "I picked up each one like it was a piece of used toilet paper, held it by the corner, and dropped it in the bag. I handed the bag back for him to take. At that point he reached down with the gun, and it was flat on the table in front of me, and I thought about pinning his hand to the counter."

Safeway taught its employees to cooperate in robberies to ensure the safety of its customers, so Earl didn't make any moves. "I could see over the back of him that one of the checkers was starting to duck underneath her check stand, and I saw a few people

running out the door, and I thought, ‘Okay, that’s really smart.’ And then he just looked at me and said, ‘MORE.’”

The store had another cash drawer for moments like this, a cash drawer that held what Earl referred to as a “chump stack.” The chump stack consisted of 25 folded \$1 bills, making it look thick enough to convince a robber he’s getting a lot of money. Earl dropped the stack in the robber’s bag, and the robber motioned the gun at Earl’s face, demanding more.

Earl turned to the store’s large safe and opened the door. He reached in with his left hand and pulled out a cash tray with \$1,000 in it. As he turned back toward the robber, he began to switch the tray from his left hand to his right hand to place it in the bag. That’s when the robber stuck the gun right under Earl’s chin, pointing it directly at his throat.

“I saw the hammer going back,” Earl recounted. He knew he was about to be shot, and he lunged to his left, trying to avoid the bullet, but to no avail. The slug hit Earl in the right collarbone, staggering him backwards from the force.

Earl took the cash tray and slammed it on the floor, yelling, “You’re not getting this now!” The robber pointed the gun at Earl again, and Earl was convinced he was going to be shot once more. Earl took cover in the store safe.

“The safe was very tall, probably five-and-a-half-feet tall. It had a huge door. I swung the door open and I dove into the safe. I stayed there for a few seconds and I thought, ‘Okay, he’s got to be gone.’ I could hear him moving. I came out of the safe and he was gone.”

Earl headed for the phone.

“The pain was so incredible at that point that I couldn’t [hold the phone], so I just dialed 9-1-1. I knew they would get it, whether I talked or not. I threw the phone on the floor, and then I began to scream.”

The pain Earl was feeling was excruciating. His collarbone had been shattered. The bullet had zigzagged throughout his insides. “Bullets are hot,” Earl said. “They’re burning metal, and it had buried itself deep in my body. I could feel it near my spine.” Earl kept screaming louder and louder, noticing that the pain seemed to lessen with each scream of anguish. The screams caught people’s attention and they ran to his aid.

A lifelong friend of Earl’s, Richard (Rick) Proper, was in the store that evening picking up diapers and baby food for his daughter. Rick heard the commotion and ran to the front of the store. Earl was still on his feet, and he opened the door to the cage to let Rick in. Rick got on the phone with emergency dispatch and yelled to Earl, “9-1-1 says they won’t come if we don’t know where the gunman is.”

Through the anguish Earl told Rick, “They’re supposed to be staked out. They’re going to come. The paramedics are going to come.” And then suddenly, Earl couldn’t talk. He couldn’t catch his breath, and he was bleeding profusely. He collapsed to the floor. His right lung had collapsed from the bullet piercing it. “I had what is called a sucking chest wound that let air into my chest,” said Earl, “So I was foaming blood from the mouth.” The paramedics arrived within a few minutes of the call. One of the paramedics asked Earl if he wanted a priest. Earl said no, he wanted a doctor and a nurse. The paramedics began to put in a call for a special life support ambulance, and Earl rebuffed them. “I’m not going to make it that long!” he pleaded. “We’ve got to go NOW!”

The emergency crew loaded Earl into the ambulance, and as they pulled out of the shopping center parking lot, Earl spotted his beloved 1971 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme. It’s brand new paint job made it sparkle under the parking lot lights. Earl thought to himself, “That’s the last time I’m going to see my car,” as the ambulance rushed off to nearby Suburban Hospital.

In the back of the ambulance, Earl’s blood pressure began to drop very rapidly. The pain became so intense that at one point Earl hoped he would die. The gunshot made it hard for Earl to breath, and his heart was having extreme difficulty pumping blood through his system.

He began to hallucinate from the lack of oxygen and internal bleeding. It took about ten minutes from the paramedics' arrival on scene to the time they wheeled Earl into the emergency room.

Suburban Hospital's shock trauma unit was ready when he arrived. They wheeled his gurney in at a running pace to the shock trauma bay and lifted him onto the table.

"Everything around me went into a white fog, and I thought, 'Okay, I'm dead,'" Earl recalled.

The doctors needed to drain his chest, so they cut a slit between his ribs to insert a chest tube. "That's a tube the size of a garden hose," Earl said. The doctor shoved the tube in and Earl began to flail and scream more than before.

He couldn't figure out how someone in as much pain as he was could still be alive. The doctors turned on the chest tube's pump and Earl's pain instantly began to subside. They eventually drained two liters of blood from Earl's chest. "A 2-liter bottle of soda," Earl said. "They pumped that much out of my chest immediately."

The bullet, a one-ounce slug of metal, had broken Earl's collarbone in half and "ping-ponged" off his ribs. It punctured his lung twelve times, and came to rest next to his T3 thoracic vertebrae, in the pectoral region of the chest.⁶⁷ "The bullet is still in me to this day," Earl stated.

When the bullet tore through Earl's chest cavity, it injured his brachial plexus group of nerves also, causing him to have numbness from his right elbow up through his shoulder, and through the upper right quadrant of his torso. Occasionally this numbness makes Earl think his lung has collapsed again because he can't feel himself breathing. Such an unsettling feeling has taken its toll on him, causing minor panic attacks that eventually abate. It's been happening like this since he was shot over thirty years ago.

The physical wounds from a gunshot may be the most pronounced, but perhaps it's the emotional wounds that carry on the longest and do the most damage. Ever since he was shot he's had a distrust of most people. "I think the word is misanthropic," Earl stated. "It's not that I don't like people, but I distrust a lot of people."

When Earl is in a social setting or a room of people, he positions himself so he can see everything going on around him. He watches where people's hands are, and he notices every little thing about everybody. "The doctor diagnosed me as agoraphobic, but I don't think I'm exactly agoraphobic," he said. "I feel safe at home. When I was shot I wanted to go home to die. I prayed to a god I didn't believe in to die, even for several days afterwards in intensive care."

Referencing his recovery and the price his experience has exacted on his psyche, Earl doesn't quite know what to make of the way his life changed that January evening. "It's

done a lot of very strange things to me. My perception of time is very different than most people's," he iterated. He compared his time awareness to being in a traffic accident. "Everything will slow down," he said. "It happened to me when I was shot. It was almost to the point like a movie where you could see the bullet come out. I remember the sparks. I could see the sparks of the gunpowder—they were very clear to me and made these sharp little rectangles, and they seemed so-o-o-o slow."

The emotional and physical costs of being shot have been heavy on Earl. He doesn't go out much because of the distrust he has for people. Physically, he still suffers pain from the wound and from the bullet pushing up against his spine. Sometimes at night the pain is so bad he's unable to make it up the one flight of stairs to his bedroom. He's moved a bed into a corner of his library and ends up sleeping there instead.

But the cost doesn't stop there. There are real monetary costs paid by Earl and society. Earl figures that taxpayers have probably spent around \$1.5 million to prosecute and keep the person who shot him incarcerated all these years. He measures the care he himself has received at taxpayer expense at around \$700,000 over the past thirty years, and said, "It will cost them more as time goes by."

Earl figures had he been able to stay in the job he was in when he was shot he would have made approximately \$1.5 million more than the amount of money he has been able to accrue since that fateful evening.

Earl has had to rely on Social Security disability benefits along with a small settlement from Safeway for income over the past three decades. His out-of-pocket medication expenses run him about \$1,000 a month, or about \$12,000 a year. That's \$360,000 he's laid out over the past thirty years. All of this for a robbery that netted a little over \$1,000.

After all he's been through, you'd probably expect Earl to be a vocal anti-gun advocate. You'd be dead wrong.

"I'm pro-people's rights," he says. "The people have a right to carry a gun. When I was shot I was anti-gun for the first couple of months. But after I had time to think about it and rationalize it, I didn't want to impose on a law-abiding person's right to own a weapon. That's their right. It's your right until you misuse it, and then it's not your right any more."

Earl doesn't think that laws are used effectively against people who misuse guns. He believes Americans have the right to own semi-automatic weapons and a reasonable amount of ammunition, for whatever purpose, as long as it's legal, and as long as guns are not used to hurt somebody. What does Earl think should be done to help reduce gun violence?

“Legalize drugs,” he said adamantly. “Legalize all drugs for people 18-years and older.”

He thinks that would solve a great deal of the gun violence problem we are facing in the U.S. Earl thinks that drugs had a part to play in his being shot. He heard after-the-fact that his shooter had used some of the robbery money to buy cocaine and a pick-up truck, but thinks the shooter must have used money from other robberies to afford such items. “I didn’t give him that much money to begin with,” he said.⁶⁸

Earl’s personal story of gun violence runs deep. His younger brother, Robert A. “Robbie” Carter, died from a self-inflicted gunshot in July of 2003.⁶⁹ Ironically, Robbie shot himself in the chest, a fact that Earl feels mortified by. The coroner told Earl that Robbie died within 15 minutes of shooting himself, which Earl is grateful to know. “I wouldn’t want him to suffer,” he said, looking back on the pain he himself has endured.

THERE’S A 99% CHANCE SOMEONE YOU KNOW WILL BE A VICTIM OF GUN VIOLENCE

Earl Carter’s shooting is an example of how gun violence in this country reaches far beyond what we may imagine. Because of our interconnectedness we have become a nation where nearly everyone knows or will know a victim of gun violence in their lifetime. A study by Dr. Sandro Galea, an epidemiologist and dean at the Boston

University School of Public Health, shows that there's a 99% chance someone in your social network will either be shot or killed by a gun during your lifetime. "When you start talking to people, you realize that everybody knows somebody who's been injured by a gun," said Dr. Galea.⁷⁰

Such is the case with Rick Proper and I, through our mutual friendship with Earl. Rick was right by Earl's side within seconds of him being shot. In a letter, Rick wrote, "I had no idea whether my friend was going to live or die. I remember sitting down and saying a prayer, and then walking to my car. And then I lost it."⁷¹

Rick summed it up succinctly in his letter. "In that instant of a bullet leaving a chamber, many lives were altered or ruined. The philosopher Kierkegaard made a statement that life is lived forward but understood backwards. For me, there is no understanding gun violence, whether it was in the past or today. And it seems that it is more prevalent today. In America, we kill more of our own people than terrorists do. I don't think that it can be stopped. And I pray that my family and the people I love won't have to be affected by violence and chaos."

It's a prayer a lot of us say every day.

ABOUT 120,000 MORE

The war within

It's a shocking claim.

More Americans have been killed by gun violence than have died in all American wars combined. What's even more shocking is that between 1968 and December 2014, 1,516,863 Americans died from domestic gun violence, compared to 1,396,733 Americans who have died in all wars since the American Revolution.⁷²

Simply put, that's about 120,000 more—and counting. The stats are crazy, especially when you break down the comparisons.

Vietnam War

November 1, 1955 to April 30, 1975 – 19 years, 180 days⁷³

58,220 American deaths⁷⁴

U.S. Gun Violence

January 1, 1993 to December 31, 2011 – 18 years

242,394 deaths in the U.S. from gun violence⁷⁵

World War II

September 1, 1939 to September 2, 1945 – 6 years, 1 day

405,399 U.S. military deaths⁷⁶

U.S. Gun Violence

2001 to 2013 – 12 years

406,496 American deaths by firearms on U.S. soil⁷⁷

Revolutionary War

April 9, 1775 to September 3, 1783 – 8 years, 4 months, 26 days

4,435 deaths⁷⁸

U.S. Gun Violence

Congressional Summer Recess: July 18, 2016 to September 5, 2016 – 50 days⁷⁹

4,500 Americans shot and killed⁸⁰

IT'S OVER IN 2 SECONDS

Shown at actual size

It takes about two seconds for a cop to shoot.

In 2015, police officers in the U.S. killed at least 28 people holding BB or pellet guns comparable to the one Tamir Rice was carrying when he was shot in Cleveland, Ohio in November of 2014. A study shows that police officers have an average response time of approximately 1.96 seconds to perceive, analyze, and evaluate a perceived threat situation, draw from a holster, and fire their weapon.⁸¹

The grainy security video of the Tamir Rice shooting shows the 12-year-old wandering aimlessly in a local neighborhood park. He brandishes what appears to be an actual pistol in his hand.⁸² A 911 call from a person in the same park was placed to police. “There’s a guy with a pistol,” the caller said. “It’s probably fake, but he’s pointing it at everybody.”⁸³

Within two seconds of the police arriving on the scene, Tamir was shot dead at point-blank range.⁸⁴

I began my MFA final project and thesis with the intent of showing gun violence from an interactive perspective. I wanted to immerse people in the scope of the statistics and the actualities of gun violence.

As I began my discussions with my committee, I bandied about ideas that would startle, that would create pause, which would elicit an emotional reaction from my audience. My philosophy about graphic design is simple—if you don’t get a reaction, then you haven’t done your job.

As a designer, I craft my stories visually. I envision an image or an object from a storytelling angle, delving into hidden context and content, coaxing out a narrative that makes people take pause and connect the story to the image. This approach led me to my first work—the “2 Seconds” poster.

After finding the image for the poster, I crafted a story around a paper I had found about police reaction times to perceived threats. I kept searching for more facts, and the search term “police shootings” led me to the Tamir Rice story, which led me to *The Cuyahoga County Prosecutor’s Report on the November 22, 2014 Shooting Death of Tamir Rice*. There in front of me was proof to the claim that police have a 1.96 second reaction time to a perceived threat of a person with a gun.

As the car came to a sliding stop, Officer Loehmann immediately exited the patrol car from the passenger door, and as he did, Tamir reached into his right side waistband. At that moment, Officer Loehmann discharged his firearm within two seconds of exiting the car. Officer Loehmann fired two shots, one of which hit Tamir in the abdomen and caused him to fall in the area between the patrol car and the gazebo.⁸⁵

Reading the story of the Tamir Rice shooting made me ponder what the police faced when they encountered the 12-year-old. Did the gun he was found to have look like the real thing? I decided I wanted to show a pellet gun in my exhibit, asking my audience if they could figure out if it was a real firearm or a pellet gun.

I went on to Amazon and searched for pellet guns, coming across a Smith & Wesson M&P Airgun. I zoomed in on the product image and couldn't believe how realistic the gun looked.

I placed an order for it, intending to display it in my exhibit near the "2 Seconds" poster. I wanted my audience to answer the question I imagined every cop has to be prepared to answer in a few short seconds—Is it real?

I thought about the concealed carry laws in Virginia and wondered if it applied to pellet guns also, especially on campus. I did a search for “concealed carry george mason university” and came across George Mason University’s “Weapons on Campus” policy.

George Mason University Policy 1120 states in part:

III. RESPONSIBILITIES AND REPORTING

A. Prohibition:

The possession of any weapon on campus by any member of the faculty, staff or student body, with the exception of law enforcement officials as cited in the policy portion of this procedure is prohibited. Weapons are defined as follows:

Any pistol, revolver, or other weapon designed or intended to propel a missile of any kind, or any dirk, bowie knife, switchblade knife, ballistic knife, razor slingshot, spring stick, metal knucks, blackjack, or any flailing instrument consisting of two or more rigid parts connected in such a manner as to allow them to swing freely, which may be known as nun chahka, nun chuck, nunchaku, shuriken, or fighting chain, or any disc, of whatever configuration, having at least two points or pointed blades which is designed to be thrown or propelled and which may be known as throwing star or oriental dart.

B. Prop Weapons:

Due to the risk of being identified as a real weapon, any item which looks like a weapon in appearance and which is utilized for any purpose on all properties of George Mason University as defined in section (I. Scope), must be reported to and approved by the University Police prior to being used in any activity. Examples of these activities include but are not limited to plays, class presentations, ROTC military exercises and Intercollegiate Athletic events.⁸⁶

Noting that the gun I intended to display is considered a prop gun, I contacted the George Mason University Police Department and was referred to Sergeant Patrick T. Bickerton. During a meeting with Sergeant Bickerton I presented the Smith & Wesson pellet gun, inquiring about how best to display the pistol. Sergeant Bickerton examined the pellet gun and commented on its extremely close resemblance to the actual handgun it is modeled after. "I own this exact same model, and there are only a few minor differences," he told me. He commented that the Smith & Wesson looked to be the same size as his gun and that it could easily be mistaken for the real thing, even by trained law enforcement personnel. When I asked him how he could tell if it were a real gun or a pellet gun, Sergeant Bickerton replied he would have to be holding the gun to make that assessment.

I then asked Sergeant Bickerton what he would do if he encountered me on the street and I pointed the pellet gun at him. "I'd hate to think," he said.⁸⁷

7 MOURNING 1

Just stop

How many tears have been shed due to gun violence?

Countless. How many Americans have been affected by gun violence? At this point in time, and I have no evidence to back my claim, I'd say everyone. It doesn't matter what race you are, what your religion is, or what your sexual orientation is. Gun violence has an insidious way of piercing one's life, even if only to make you pause and think, "What if that had been me?"

Gun violence in Chicago soared in 2016, and it doesn't show signs of ebbing.⁸⁸ Even the vigils for shooting victims have become crime scenes. Such was the case with Jamayah Fields, known as "Tinka" to her friends and relatives.

Fields, 20, of Chicago, was shot to death outside an elementary school early on the morning of January 23, 2017. Mourners were gathered on a street corner the evening of Wednesday, January 25th to memorialize her when their grieving turned into bloodshed.

Around 8:15 p.m. a car approached the mourners gathered on Chicago's South Side, and someone inside the vehicle fired on the crowd. Then the shooter parked the car, got out, walked back to the crowd, and opened fire again. Caught in the fusillade were three boys, ages 12, 16, and 17, three 20-year-old females, and a 34-year-old woman. All the victims were expected to survive.⁸⁹

What if it had been you? How would you feel after being shot, should you live through the experience? What if it had been a loved one injured or killed? How about a close friend? Would you mourn their loss?

Americans have seen it time and time again. A person is shot or killed, or a mass shooting occurs, and a candlelight vigil is held. Soon, a free-form memorial takes shape at the scene of the violence.

These impromptu memorials tend to incorporate similar ephemera wherever they are found on the streets of America. Poems, personal messages, candles, balloons, flowers, photographs, personal items—they have all become iconic heraldry for gun violence.⁹⁰ This has been especially true in Chicago, Illinois over the past year.

In their 2016 joint exhibition, “Not Forgotten: Chicago Street Memorials,” photographer Thomas Ferella and Roosevelt University journalism professor Anne-Marie Cusac worked together to curate some of these memorials left around the city.

In a WTTW interview, Ferella said, “These are free-form art installations and nobody is curating them. They are being built in a very innate, inner passion that comes from grief. It’s a pure art form and I think a lot of really good art comes from that feeling.”⁹¹

That is partially what drove me to create a street memorial within my exhibition. I want to capture the feelings of the populace, the people that have been affected personally by gun violence, and those that have an opinion but perhaps have kept their feelings pent up.

During the WTTW interview, journalism professor Anne-Marie Cusac said, “One of the things memorials do is they create new symbols and turn a place of trauma into a place of love. They are contributing to a kind of healing, both individually and for the community.”

That’s one of the points I am trying to invoke. The street memorial I have initiated invites gallery visitors to leave mementos, write messages, and to express their reactions to what they have experienced and how they feel. It’s the entire premise behind my thesis—that graphic design can be used, and is best used, as a reactive catalyst of thought. Visitors that leave their reactions or ephemera behind will be active participants, as will those who merely view and ponder the work put before them.

Street memorials are often the only evidence left behind of a life lived in relative obscurity. Street memorials are how we process grief as a society at whole, and how we celebrate a life that others never had a chance to be a part of.

If it's true that within our lifetime we will know someone within our social circle touched by gun violence, then the street memorial will continue to be a sign of our interconnectedness with the madness before us.

Street memorials allow us to express our emotions, individually and as a community. They allow us to express our love and hatred within the same time frame. We show our love for the person killed while deploring the obscenity of gun violence.

We convey our humanity through the signs, the notes, and the other elements we leave behind. We are left to ponder how many of us are thinking the same thing.

“Thank God it wasn't me.”

IT'S A ZERO SUM GAME

We all lose

Gun violence in America is a war on the senses.

It's a rhetoric-filled assault on the basic tenets of our personal beliefs, our institutions, our foundational principles, and our daily lives. It's a constant battle for the truth, a slog through mind-numbing statistics, and a trek that numbs you to the core at times.

I didn't realize it until I started this thesis, but gun violence has taken its toll on me for longer than I imagined.

I amassed so many facts, figures, and examples related to gun violence that I had to buy another hard drive just to store everything. I'd get lost in the minutiae at times, reading detailed descriptions of horrific acts committed with guns, dwelling on how each perpetration of violence could be featured in my exhibition somehow.

I had to come to the realization that at some point I would need to stop collecting data and begin designing my exhibition. There was no way I could keep up with all the data and all the stories, especially on my own. I discovered it was a zero-sum game, one

where all sides of the argument ended up losing. No matter what the hyperbole, for or against, guns injure and kill people, and that affects us all. Every single day.

What I thought would be a non-judgmental approach toward gun violence soon melted away into a strong rejection of individuals and organizations pushing a pro-gun agenda.

Am I for the Second Amendment? To a point. I don't believe the founding fathers meant that every American should be able to own a semi-automatic weapon capable of destroying multiple lives in just a few seconds. I think they meant that every American should have access to a musket so they could form a militia to battle tyrannical governments, which was quite the thing when the U.S. Constitution was originally drafted.

Do I think that the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun? It's rare that happens. If you own a gun, you're actually more likely to kill yourself with it than shoot someone in an effort to protect yourself or your family.⁹²

I have read hundreds of accounts of gun violence that don't show up in my work—I don't have enough room and I don't have enough time to share all of the statistics I've uncovered. I've seen hundreds of photos of the slaughter perpetrated with guns—suicide victims, murder victims, dead cops, and people killed by cops. I've viewed images of the

aftermath of despicable carnage—floors awash in blood at a mass shooting, people blown to bits from a torrent of gunfire, and dead children who had no chance of growing up.

I've read accounts that made me shudder, and after a while it seemed as though the headlines blended together, creating an infinite loop of violence.

My research into gun violence has invaded my psyche by making me consider just what we've become as a nation, seemingly hell-bent on arming every man, woman, and child. How does someone like Adam Lanza walk into an elementary school and kill twenty 6- and 7-year-olds? What is going on in someone's mind, in their life, to send them down such a vile path?

Are the gun laws in this country too lax? At one point does your right to own a gun impinge upon my right to be safe? Should we ban guns, or should we ban bullets? Should we allow guns to be bought and sold privately without any background checks? Do we need to put more money into mental health issues, or do we need to put more money into firearm safety training?

These are all questions I've asked myself and there are no easy answers. At least not from my perspective. Perhaps that's because gun violence is so pervasive. Is it that we don't notice the violence surrounding us unless the number killed is sufficient to make the

evening news? Or have we become so immune to the death and destruction around us that we've given up on a solution?

I was revolted as I examined accounts of a Texas mother killing her two daughters to eke revenge on her husband. I didn't even know how to react when the Pulse nightclub massacre took place. I was watching the news report thinking, "When will this end?"

Apparently never. I still find it hard to fathom that we have not enacted comprehensive gun laws in this country to deal with what I consider to be an epidemic.

My personal touch-points with guns continued to grow as well. I came home from work one day to discover jewelry and other personal items scattered about under my deck. There were several plastic bags of necklaces and a couple of jewelry boxes. When I opened the jewelry boxes I discovered a huge diamond ring and what looked to be a high school ring. I realized I hadn't stumbled on someone's trash, so I called the cops.

When the Fairfax County Police arrived the officer told me he was willing to bet the items belonged to neighbors who had just moved in down the street. Seems they had left one of their cars unlocked and someone had stolen a wallet, jewelry, and a couple of handguns. They had recovered the wallet and now the jewelry, but not the handguns. "It was probably teenagers," the officer told me.

Hearing that teenagers in my neighborhood had broken into someone's car was disconcerting enough, but knowing they had stolen weapons was a bit much for my feeling of safety. I leave for work before dawn, and I'll admit to being super-cautious going to my car for a week or so. Standing at the end of my front walk, I would look up and down the street to make sure there wasn't anyone around. I feared being robbed at gunpoint, which is odd, considering that I live in one of the most affluent, and supposedly safest, counties in America.

I found that my super-saturated exposure to guns and gun violence led me to reconsider my feelings and my approaches toward any downtime I was able to squander. I began to ignore news reports and data presentations about gun violence—I was up to my eyeballs in facts and figures, and if I took any more on it would be like drinking from a fire hose. To say that I am sick of guns would not be an understatement.

This project has led me to leave my comfort zone in the realm of graphic design and go down paths I never considered when I first took on the challenge. I have had to abandon my beloved 8.5" x 11" printed page universe and venture into the large format printing, 3-D world in a way I'm not used to. I've designed trade show exhibits over the span of my career, but I've never designed an exhibit of my own work. I've spent countless hours researching exhibit materials, ranging from half-torso mannequins used in my college campuses t-shirt display to actual emergency lights used in police cars.

I've had to figure out how to hang my work to better portray the true carnage behind the numbers, and I've spent what seems like a lifetime finding non-stock images that give the proper visual cues. Hours and hours have been devoted to making sure everything is as authentic as possible, right down to the body bag on display with the "More Than Wars" hanging graphic (though the body in the bag is a stuffed mannequin and not a real body).

Some of my original incarnations of this project were a bit over the top I'll admit, in an effort to shock the public into seeing the true horrors of gun violence in America. But as I did more research and developed my ideas, I found that I didn't need to shock anyone. All I needed to do was present the data and let the designs do the work.

If nothing else comes of this project, I hope I have made some of you stop, look, listen, and think. Think about what gun violence is doing to our nation. Think about how it impacts you, your friends, and your family. Think about the toll it has exacted, and continues to exact, on our psychological makeup and how fear enters our worlds when we go to school, go out for an evening, or just stand at a bus stop trying to catch a ride to work.

Gun violence drags down our economy and impedes our ability to move forward as a nation. There has to be a way out of this morass. There has to be something better than living under the gun.

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BIOGRAPHY

In 1973, at the height of the Watergate investigation, **James X. Van Meer** decided he wanted to study journalism in college. The trouble was, schools were packed with wannabe investigative reporters, so he chose to combine his love of writing and design and pursue advertising. After Jim received his Associate of Arts in Advertising Design from Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland, he transferred to American University in Washington, D.C. to complete his studies.

After graduating from AU in 1977 with a Bachelor of Arts in Design, Jim began his career with GEICO in Chevy Chase, Maryland. There he was a designer for a year before being promoted to Art Director.

Aching to get into the agency world, Jim left GEICO after three years to move on to a Creative Director position at The Paton Group, a small ad agency in Alexandria, Virginia. During Jim's five-year tenure there he expanded his career, becoming Vice President, and worked with a variety of clients, including the 1981 Presidential Inaugural Committee.

Jim struck out on his own in 1985, forming a marketing communications consultancy named Van Meer Creative. Jim continued to do work for the advanced technology companies from The Paton Group's client list and broadened his base, adding organizations such as Arena Stage, the Turkish Government Tourism Office, and the Smithsonian Institution to his roster.

In 1996 Jim moved on to the American Petroleum Institute, where he still is today. As Senior Manager of Marketing and Creative, Jim leads the entire marketing communications effort for API Global, API's international business line of programs, publications, and services.

Jim joined George Mason University as an Adjunct Professor in 2015, teaching Professional Design Practices to undergraduate students.

Jim is a native of the Washington, D.C. area. He and his wife, Mary, reside in Burke, Virginia.