Executive Summary

On April 17, 2013, the 4C Campus Community Civic Collaborative Initiative* hosted a community dialogue about Guns, Security and Public Life. This topic emerged as important due to several high profile tragedies over the past year that involved guns. These recent events caused concerns and reactions to the issue of guns and safety as they affect our community.

The forum was intended as an opportunity for members of our Harrisonburg/Valley community to discover the many ways we think about these issues. Might there be ways to both protect our freedoms and ensure the safety of our communities? Are the values of freedom and security both equal?

The discussions were facilitated by trained communication students at JMU who researched the issues, designed the process that was used to ensure productive conversations where people could gain understanding of views different from their own and provide ways for citizens to think together about the ways they feel about guns and security.

The event will took place at the Lucy Sims Community Center gym on Wednesday, April 17, from 6-8 pm.

*The 4C Campus Community Civic Collaborative is a joint partnership between the Fairfield Center and the James Madison University School of Communication Studies.

Structure

The forum followed a modified National Issues Forum format which provided some areas for consideration with a general goal of having participants explore various ways to address the issues of guns and security by considering how each way to address it impacts both freedom and security. These options for addressing the issue emerged after nearly 40 pre-forum interviews with community members. (The handout provided to participants is attached as Appendix A).

Attendees

In addition to the 30 trained facilitators, 44 community members attended the forum.

Explore

In this section, participants were asked to share why they came to the forum. Here are the types of responses shared.

- To hear about other perspectives about gun control
- Voice their own opinion on gun control
- To learn about the process

Those who said they use guns noted the following types of uses:

- Those who use guns in their professional career
- Those who use guns in their personal recreational life (hunting/target practice)
• Those who use guns to protect themselves

In this first section issues of trust emerged as important for some.

• “I feel like the two sides of the issue are from a regulatory standpoint: Do we regulate the individual or do we regulate the access to firearms themselves?”
• “Freedom is the ability to do whatever you please without infringing on the rights of others.” “I like that definition because I think it goes along with respect.”
• “I am first to say I am not a gun enthusiast. I believe in a society in America based on trust. I don’t go around in this circle here to see if you have a gun. I trust that you don’t. But if you’re in a situation where you need one, I trust that you have the proper training to use it. That’s why we have law enforcement as a first resort, instead of trying to take the place of them.”
• “In order to respect the rights of others, it kind of means you trust others in your community.”

Consider

In this section, broken into three subsections, participants were asked to consider the effects on both freedom and security of a) restricting availability, b) expanding public safety, and c) increasing education. Keys themes and tensions that emerged in each section are identified and several quotes are offered in each section to provide a sense of how participants articulated their views.

Restrict Availability

“Taking guns off the street may make you feel good but it is not going to solve any problems”

“For some people, it is all about restriction. But it’s important to have that prevention aspect because people that want to own guns without evil intentions should be able to.”

“I don’t mind required training before owning a gun—however afraid of snowball effect on firearm laws. Once you give up some of your liberty, it’s impossible to get it back”

• It is important to have prevention, not restriction
• Restricting availability is a slippery slope because it deals with restricting the 2nd amendment—government involvement (freedom) vs. security
• Laws about restricted availability already aren’t being followed—additional ones will not work either

Expand Public Safety

“I agree that there should be more security in public schools. There’s no reason to have guns in K-12 schools. But I don’t want children to grow up in a society where the constantly feel in fear, with this constantly surrounding them. You don’t want kids to be afraid to go outside.”
“That’s my main concern. I appreciate the opportunity to live in an open society. When I came in here today, I didn’t have any fear whatsoever that a bomb would go off or someone would pull out their gun after an argument. When I go to a movie theatre or shop, I trust our society is based on that openness.”

- Social responsible society = safe society
- You have to give up some rights in order to be protected
- Balancing government control and private rights/lives will always be a struggle
- We don’t know who to trust to have guns
- Determined people will find a way to use guns for violence regardless of safety measures
- We like living in a society that we feel we can trust our neighbors to do the right thing
- Argument for freedom is based on good faith/trust
- Increased security measures can be intimidating presence/distracting, Don’t want to be in a society constantly in fear. Plus there is the economic impact to fill positions — who will pay. In trying to create a safe image — what really changes?

Increasing Education

“It would make me feel so much safer if everyone who purchased a gun does have the license and the background of learning how to use it.”

“The gun community is facing such a backlash from negative news. The media has a negative slant on it and that’s a problem. There’s no way you can force every citizen how to take a class. Offering them would be great, but some people might not go.”

“People are the ultimate problem because they’re not communicating. So many times it’s a group thing that was executed by an individual. Most of these people aren’t loners — they have people who they’ve talked to. Mentally ill people should not have a gun.”

“There is not a kid on my street that I am not responsible for”

Discussion Points:

- Respect elders and law enforcement
- Community reinforces moral values — perceptions are influenced by media
  - Problems are not being solved effectively
  - Teach people to question media bias and sensationalism
  - Need more attention to issues outside of media influence
- Not everyone in the community wants to help
  - Very little funding for legislation
  - We want quick fixes; don’t want to admit we are the problem
- Community is responsible for every child in the neighborhood — it’s about communication, respect, and integrity
  - Comes down to teaching children right and wrong
  - Education from groups like big brothers big sisters
  - As a culture, need to say no to violence
- A positive snowball effect will occur when we instill good values in the community
  - Belief that change is possible
- Information is available, but not everyone takes the time to access it
Need to educate about existing laws
- Citizens’ duty to be informed, not government’s job
- Obligation to help disperse information

- Benefit of education on wellness: new healthcare plan increased psychiatric care
- Who determines how/what is taught?
- Education can reduce fear
- Education most beneficial for preventing accidents, not mass murders
- Can prevent stereotypes
- Expensive to educate everyone
  - Should be free, accessible by all
- Want peace of mind from knowing those who have guns are educated
  - Switzerland as possible role model — all men receive military training
  - Titles for guns, similar to those for cars — would be difficult to enforce
  - Training should be mandatory

Reflection
In this stage, participants in their small groups were asked to reflect on the discussion and consider whether or not they could identify any common ground in their views.

“There’s a thin line between love, peace, and happiness, and then hurt, violence, and hatred. If I see somebody that’s hurting I try to reach out to them to provide assistance. Violence results from hatred. I just know that society is changing and I think the more ways we can communicate like we are now can help.”

“I cannot kill an animal, I could not do that. But I support your right to do that. I’ll eat it! Give me some steak.”

“I’ve been to a lot of airports recently and the security — It’s a hassle. But the payoff is worth it.”

“I fear living in a society that doesn’t take care of itself more than guns themselves.”

Discussion Points:
- Create a safe environment for yourself
  - Community action doesn’t infringe on liberty the same way government action does
  - Community initiatives will create a nationwide movement
- People are not addressing or working to fix the real problem
- Fear is a natural reaction, but it can get in the way of making sound arguments
  - Can we use fear as a motivation to learn?
  - Politicians are using “fear” to gain votes
  - People are reacting out of fear (i.e. buying guns after Newtown)
  - It’s like we have PTSD as a nation — we are guided by fear
- People are not taking into account the faces that are effected
- Criminals are less likely to break into homes with guns
  - Have to consider statistics in order to have conversations

Group Reflection: What can we do?
The final stage brought all of the small groups together and asked the assembled group what tangible steps might be taken to both increase freedom and security regarding the issue of guns in our community.

- Be much nicer to strangers, get to know your neighbors
- Volunteer to educate each other
• Building relationships
• Be open minded to other peoples views; prevent knee-jerk reactions
• Forgive minor annoyances — don’t assume the worst
• Try to limit anger and violence in your life
• Promote non-violence as power
• I dispel misconceptions and generalizations and show how guns are a means of self-protection
• Universities could speak with firearm dealers/ranges — get them to provide training before anyone purchases a firearm, and if they do that the university would promote them on campus as a safe place to learn about firearms.
• It is important to be brave enough to approach the proper authorities if we come across a person who is at risk mentally
• Come together as a community as a group of people rejecting people who are the cause of the violence
• Increase education and exposure to firearms; decrease fear and misconceptions
• Be willing to change if it is for the greater good
• Have informed conversations, not just passionate debate
  o Speak out on things we disagree about
  o Look for and acknowledge the things we have in common
  o Involve younger generation in community dialogues
  o Conversation about true problem, not just symptoms
• Involve our congressman — make our voices known
• Commit to change and be willing to pay for it
• Expect private businesses to come up with their own safety regulations

What community members do you think need to hear this?

• Senator Mark Warner
• Tim Kaine
• City Council
• President of JMU, EMU, Bridgewater
• Board of Supervisors
• Professors — people who can help facilitate these sorts of discussions
• Board of Visitors
• Communities for Solutions

Appendix A: Forum Participant Handout
Welcome
Welcome to the 4C Campus Community Civic Collaborative Initiative. We are glad you can join us as we host a community dialogue about Guns, Security and Public Life. Recent events have sparked many different reactions to the issue of guns and safety as they affect our community. We would like to offer an opportunity for members of our Harrisonburg/Valley community to discover the many diverse ways we think about these issues. While there is much national dialogue on the topic, we want focus on Virginia, our community, and the areas of this topic that affect us most.

Today’s Topic Area

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<th>Ownership</th>
<th>Public Safety</th>
<th>Education</th>
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<td>The first area we will discuss will be the topic of gun ownership and the access to guns. This area includes other’s perceptions of who has the “right” to own guns, or if guns are okay in the “right hands”. Also, we will talk about how our community evaluates individuals who own guns. Other areas may include what processes are needed to strengthen gun laws and ownership privileges, as well as the benefits and concerns of community members owning guns.</td>
<td>The second area of discussion will be on the topic of public safety. This brings us to consider impact of private rights and responsibilities on public safety issues. This area considers how much safety is needed in our community, as well as how much safety is too much before it affects our freedom. Suggestions could include increased police force, adding security and metal detectors in schools, or licensing requirements.</td>
<td>The third area will focus on education. This could potentially include strengthening existing educational resources, creating new resources within the community regarding gun safety, or more resources for mental health education. The area of education could also include how we shape our community conversations on issues involving guns and violent crime, and how our views about education regarding guns may differ from views in urban areas.</td>
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Background

- Virginia is the leading state in the nation for submitting mental health records into the National Instant Criminal Background database.
- A law passed in January 2013 does not allow citizens to access the records of concealed handgun owners in the state of Virginia.
- In January 2012, Gov. Bob McDonell took away the limit on the number of handguns a person can purchase each month.
- Several bills allowing for armed security guards/ resource officers in private and public schools advanced to the Virginia House in January 2013.
- There is no permit required to purchase a gun in the state of Virginia.
- Virginia denied 3,444 gun purchases in 2012 due to failed background checks.
We believe that at the heart of every public problem the solution lies in a tradeoff of values. The key is to identify the conflicting values, and decide as a community what values we are willing to give up in order to get more of another value. It is really a tradeoff between good and good. Not a fight between good and bad. For example at the heart of the problem of guns, security, and public life there is a tension between two good, desirable values: Freedom and Security.

**Freedom**- is the want to be able to make our own choices and live according to the individual freedoms we are guaranteed.

**Security**- is the want to be safe and secure as members of a community. We desire a safe culture where we can be protected and free in our schools, homes, and communities. We want to be able to have the highest quality of life possible in a secure community we feel that we belong to.

What freedoms can we give up in order to increase safety? What security measures can we, as a community, give up in order to insure our freedoms? Can we increase personal freedom while increasing public security? Are the values of freedom and security both equal? What other values have tension when determining the relationship between guns, security, and public life?