

ASHLEY: The raw statistics on gun violence in America are stark.

RICHARD: In 2020, the latest full year measured by the Centers for Disease Control, more than 45,000 people died from gun-related injuries in the U.S.

ASHLEY: So, today, we're going to look at the gun debate through a Common Ground lens. Can we agree on the difference between responsible gun ownership and the reckless use of guns? This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. We wanted to do this episode in response to statistics that reveal America's epidemic of mass shootings and gun crimes shows no signs of reprieve.

ASHLEY: In fact, the crisis may be getting much worse. According to the Gun Violence Archive, there have been more than 90 mass shootings since the 1st of the year.

RICHARD: We speak with a journalist and former firearms industry executive who tells us about his love of guns as well as criticisms of the business that he was once part of. It's a fresh take on an issue that leaves many people feeling divided and depressed.

ASHLEY: First, we speak with Patrik Jonsson, the Georgia-based correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor. He writes about the South, gun rights, race, extremist groups, natural disasters, and hockey, a sport he loves. I asked Patrik first, just how bad is the gun violence crisis in America?

PATRIK: Well, I think as far as mass shootings, I mean, I've been reporting on this for a while now, and it's as bad as I've seen it. But, I mean, the statistics are unmistakable as are the—it feels like daily—headlines across the country in all regions. It doesn't seem to be sparing any particular part of the country.

ASHLEY: Why do so many people love guns in this country, do you think?

PATRIK: Well, what's not to love? I mean, they're fun. I've owned guns. Not only are they interesting to a certain kind of person—they can be competitive. We have high schools here in Georgia that have competitive air pistol shooting, like ranges in the basements of high school here. The appeal is pretty broad, really, and it actually has become broader the last few years. There's a lot of new groups that are joining the gun rights, or at least gun carry or gun ownership movement, including a lot of liberals and African Americans. I've done stories about African American men and women, also, who are buying and carrying and learning how to use weapons. So I think 63% of people now carry or own guns for self-defense, but I think a lot of people that I've talked to, at least, also have this basic notion that were there ever a time that they would need it, were there ever a tyrannical kind of government to rise, that's why the 2nd Amendment is there. And people take it seriously.

RICHARD: You live in Georgia. Is there a different attitude towards guns in the South than in some other parts of the country? Are people more likely to be part of a strong gun culture?

PATRIK: It's a little hard for me to answer that because I've mostly lived in the South. I personally first shot guns in New England with my buddies on the sea coasts of New Hampshire. We used to go to a old sandpit and shoot. And I would say the rural aspects of gun ownership, I think, is everywhere in the country. But the South is, of course, very rural, and there is a very strong tradition just of a pioneer

mentality and a settler mentality where a gun was how you fed yourself and how you defended yourself. That instinct or that idea certainly is very strong here and remains. So you can see it. Georgia's really led the way the last five or six years in liberalizing gun carry. I mean, Hartsfield-Jackson is, I think, the busiest airport on the planet, the Atlanta airport, and a couple years ago, the legislature allowed people to carry guns at Hartsfield-Jackson. So it seemed like a huge shift at the time. I'm not sure it's a completely Southern tradition, but I'm not surprised a Southern legislature did that.

RICHARD: This term "open carry" is used a lot. What is open carry? For instance, in Georgia, the open carry law, what does that allow people to do?

PATRIK: It's self-explanatory, in a way, but it's a good question because it's a little more complicated than that. But it's basically just if you are carrying a weapon openly, in the past, that could've been a precursor for a police stop at the very least. But today, in Georgia certainly, and many other parts, too, where they have open carry, is constitutionally allowed. So that's not a reasonable cause for suspicion of anything, in other words.

ASHLEY: Last year, I think Atlanta canceled a music festival, right, because of open carry?

PATRIK: Yes.

ASHLEY: Can you just talk about what happened there? That was really interesting.

PATRIK: Yeah. That hit me because it was the Music Midtown Festival, which had been going on in Atlanta for years, an absolutely wonderful, awesome festival. I went there several times. I brought my little kids there one time, which was to see Weezer. Awesome show. It was part of Atlanta's pride that it had this giant festival. So what happened last year with some of the shifts in Georgia law towards allowing open carry, so-called "constitutional carry"—and we never got, really, the answer. The event organizers kind of hedged a little bit, but it had to do with insurance, I believe, that they were concerned that they couldn't provide a sense of safety, legally, as well, to the concertgoers and attendees.

ASHLEY: Were there a lot of recriminations? Did that stir up a hornets nest of recriminations when they announced that they were canceling the festival?

PATRIK: Well, I think it was just a real blow to civic pride to Atlanta. That was the biggest recrimination. It was kind of a glimpse of what this debate is about. It's about safety, right? But yet, safety is exactly what gun rights people are talking about, too, is those two ideas really clashed at that moment. So I wouldn't say recrimination as much as just civic shock.

ASHLEY: And what about the view of safety from gun owners and gun rights groups?

PATRIK: There's different aspects to that, but one thing that I reported a lot on and that you can definitely see, this idea that there's a civic duty to carry and to protect people in your community from harm, where you kind of step up, really, and become someone who's willing to put yourself out there. When you talk to gun owners, carrying a gun, especially around as being your identity, is a heavy burden. It's literally heavy, and it's hard to hide. It's hard to wear a gun. It's uncomfortable. But, like one guy I've talked to a number of times, his point is guns aren't made to be comfortable; they're made to be comforting. It kind of speaks to this idea of it being part of—well, like you said, part of your identity, part of who you present yourself and who you feel you are.

ASHLEY: A lot of people would say guns make us safer whether they're carried openly on your person or whether you just have one in your truck or at home. Is there any truth to that?

PATRIK: Oh, my gosh. This is such a perennial question. There's so much research on this, and there isn't an absolute answer to that yet. I saw it in one of my stories where we talked to young gun owners. We talked to this one guy who said he was aware of all the damage that guns can do because that's measurable in guns and victims and death. We can measure that a million ways. But how do you measure the bad that's prevented by guns? And that defines it right there. It is hard to measure that. That I've seen that is pretty good and taken in aggregate, there is evidence that, on the whole, more gun carry, more open carry, more guns in general will equal more violence.

RICHARD: Do they also equal less property crime? Do people feel safer, in many cases, with a gun?

PATRIK: You nailed it, I think. We were talking about the South earlier, and I've been doing some other stories about the South and the culture of violence that's uniquely Southern. The South has more violence per capita than any other part of the country. That's just the way it is. But it also has less property crimes than other parts of the country. And it's commonsensical. If you want to go into someone's house to take their stereo or something or even step on their property and grab something from their yard, if you know almost everyone's armed, and if you don't know if that person has a gun or if he/she is home, you're more likely not to do that.

RICHARD: You talked about common sense. What about common ground? Are there more prospects for finding common ground on this issue of gun violence than there were a year ago, a decade ago?

PATRIK: For sure. There's no doubt about that. I've shot guns. I've owned guns. I've interviewed lots of gun owners and people who don't own guns, and there's a ton of common ground there because everyone is coming from the same point. They want to be safe, right? They want to be safe in their homes and their communities. They don't want their neighbors hurt. They don't want to be the victim of random gun violence. So that is a huge common ground.

And Congress, last June, I think, passed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, and that was a huge deal. I mean, I've been covering this for years. I was shocked that that happened. It made some new allowances for gun ownership where it kind of delineated—if your gun is taken away from you under the law, it showed a clear way to get that gun back, in other words by keeping a clean record or whatever the specifics were.

But it was definitely a nod towards a more conservative viewpoint, but then it put real money and force behind trying to encourage states to pass red flag laws, which are laws that—if you have a run-in with police under certain crimes, there are ways that, usually from your family that raises concern, that the government can say, "Well, we're going to remove your guns until you can—we're going to remove them today. We're going to have a process, a legal process, for you to get them back," but that there's an actual mechanism to get guns away from people who may be having a mental breakdown or something that raises concern for people in the community. But I think there's lots of common ground there, for sure, and I think we're seeing it over concern of some of this mass violence that we're seeing, too, that's disturbing to every American, no matter where you are on the spectrum of gun ownership or gun rights, that people realize there's a problem.

ASHLEY: Just over 10 years ago, the mass shooting took place at Sandy Hook, a school in Newtown, Connecticut. Twenty-six people were killed, I think, and most of those were children. I know you were there just a day or two afterwards to cover the aftermath. What do you most remember about that time?

PATRIK: Well, that came back to me last year after the shooting in Uvalde, which was so similar.

RICHARD: Uvalde, Texas.

PATRIK: Right, which was also a school shooting where almost as many children and teachers were killed there as were in Newtown. But I arrived in Newtown just a day or so after that shooting, 11 days before Christmas. I didn't know what to expect. The community was in shock, but, as a reporter, it was probably the hardest story and the one that most affects me to this day because of something that happened that evening. I went to get something to eat that night. It was a pizza place, and I was sitting at the bar, and there was a Christmas party going on. And it was a very somber Christmas party, and one of the guys came up, and it turned out it was the fire department's Christmas party. And these were all the same men and women who had, just a day before, been in that school with all those kids.

I'll just never forget the look in this guy's eye, which was—it's hard to describe. It was just so sad. Here they were, trying to have a party because they didn't want to—they just didn't want to cancel it, I guess. It was really his eyes that stay with me and that really underscored just how psychically damaging gun violence can be. That was searing, so that still colors my thinking on this a lot. I realized later that that actually was very traumatic, and the whole thing was traumatic, but seeing how it manifested in those firefighters was really tough, and it still is.

RICHARD: Thank you very much for joining us.

PATRIK: Yeah. Thank you, guys, for having me. I really appreciate it. It's been great talking to you.

ASHLEY: Yeah, thank you very much.

RICHARD: Patrik Jonsson joining us from his home in Georgia.

ASHLEY: And hearing that story of the fireman he saw just after the Sandy Hook shootings and the look in his eyes and how that remained with Patrik all this this time and how it's affected him, as well, I thought that was really moving.

RICHARD: Yeah. Many of us journalists cover tragedies, and it affects us, as well. I've covered wars, the aftermath of plane crashes, natural disasters, and stories involving violence, and it can be very hard sometimes to separate my own feelings with the need to do the job and also write the story, broadcast the story in time for a deadline.

ASHLEY: We mentioned numbers at the beginning, and they're relatively easy to find, but the emotional toll of gun violence is really difficult to put into words or quantify.

RICHARD: Yeah. You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley. You can find more episodes of Let's Find Common Ground at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts, and there's also a link, a blue box that says, "Click here and tell us what you'd like to hear."

RICHARD: We want to get some new ideas about future shows. Who do you want us to talk to? What subjects? What ideas around finding common ground should we be tackling?

ASHLEY: Give us feedback. We'll mention the web address again at the end of the show.

RICHARD: And next, our interview with former firearms executive Ryan Busse.

ASHLEY: Ryan grew up around gun, hunting and shooting with his father. Despite being a strong critic of the NRA, Ryan is still a proud gun owner, hunter, and outdoorsman. He lives in Montana. His recent book is *Gunfight: My Battle Against the Industry that Radicalized America*.

RICHARD: We first spoke with Ryan for the podcast last year. He insisted that he was in no way anti-gun.

RYAN: Just because I think background checks are a good idea or because I believe in the right of states to permit concealed carry or I think that armed intimidation is wrong or I think that open carry should be outlawed in a democracy, there are those on the far right who believe that that makes me anti-gun. But I refuse to live under that label. I'm not anti-gun. I don't even know how many guns I own, more than three dozen. I haven't counted them. I've sold millions of guns. I don't know how I can be labeled as anti-gun. But I think the idea that me, an award-winning firearms executive who shoots with his boys every chance he gets and doesn't know how many guns he owns, can be labeled as anti-gun, I think there you have a very illustrative example about how divisive our country has become.

ASHLEY: What is the difference between responsible gun ownership, in your mind, and reckless use of guns?

RYAN: Well, I think any healthy democracy is debating those sorts of questions every day. I don't think there is a clear answer to that. I think that a healthy democracy lives its life in the gray area. I believe that guns is an extremely illustrative and important fault line in our society, but I think there are things that are clearly not responsible. I don't know where the line is exactly, but I can give you some examples of things that I think are not responsible. The idea that firearms should be used to intimidate protestors, lawmakers, average citizens, which we've seen many, many times in the last two to three years, this idea of authoritarian intimidation with guns in the open, people who do that want to try to cover up what they're actually doing.

They say that they're just exercising their rights. No, they're not. You take a gun out in the open in front of a bunch of kids who are protesting, you're trying to intimidate them. That's not reasonable. It's not responsible. Really, it has no place in a functioning democracy. So, I guess, to me, that's a very clear example of something that's far over the responsible line.

RICHARD: How do you contrast that with your behavior as a gun owner?

RYAN: Most people who grew up like I did and are still being raised in a responsible gun-owning America understand there are certain things that you never do, and this applies to me. It goes to the way I was raised. It's the way that hundreds of people who have reached out to me since the release of my book

and the various podcasts I've been on, they all adhere to these same sorts of things. You never take a gun to a fight. The idea of responsible gun ownership is you want to do everything possible to never have to use a gun in any sort of societal... against human interaction. So you never go to the fight. You always try to leave. You never brandish a gun to intimidate. It's not part of your identity. It's not part of some sort of weird faux-patriotic machismo that we've seen. All of these things are things that responsible gun owners would never do. For me, it's very important that we adhere to those sorts of rules.

RICHARD: I think what you're saying, the sense that there is nuance in an intelligent conversation about guns, is something we so rarely hear in our media and in our very often angry debates about the role of guns. You are very comfortable around guns. Guns are very much part of your lifestyle, but there's an aspect, and some of it's a recent aspect of owning guns, which really troubles you. Can you explore that more?

RYAN: Sure. John Adams is famous for essentially saying that our democracy or our Constitution can only be applied to a moral people, and by moral, I think he meant responsible. And I think that anything with this society, we have always tried to enumerate our freedoms very carefully in all of our founding documents and in our reams and reams of laws on which our country is supposed to function, but responsibilities have always been this ethereal thing that we just understand. They're sort of a part of our cultural norm. I think what's happened is we have this runaway focus on freedoms which we all agree are important. Owning guns is one of them. But with each freedom, there's a commensurate need for responsibility, and, with guns, because of the exceedingly powerful reality of owning guns and what they represent, what they can do, what they're designed to do, we have a commensurate exceedingly important need for responsibility. It's that responsibility that I think has been largely dispensed with, certainly through the Trump years.

The reason I think that is is because political intimidation and authoritarianism has become a tool of the Right or a desired outcome of the Right, and nothing jumpstarts authoritarianism like guns do because they upend our civility. If you're sitting around with a group of friends at dinner waiting on one to show up, and you have a nice, civil dinner, and then that last person shows up brandishing a gun, your entire civil existence is upended, and that's very similar to what I think radicals have intended to do to our political situation in our country with guns.

ASHLEY: Demand for guns reached, by all accounts, a record high during the first year of the pandemic. Precise statistics vary, but according to official statistics, more than twice as many guns are being sold now compared to 20 years ago. Is gun industry marketing mostly the reason for this, do you think?

RYAN: It's certainly part of it. The through-line of my book and my existence, my life, is that I came to understand the NRA and very powerful political forces meant to divide our country realize that the sort of things that could drive terrible political outcomes for our country but good political outcomes for a narrow band of our society, meaning radical NRA sort of political radicals, the hatred, fear, divisiveness, racism, the things that increase angst in a society, those drive fearful people to vote in irrational ways. So we've seen some of what feels like irrational political outcomes. But those are precisely the same things that drive firearms purchases because fearful people purchase guns.

So it's not an accident that the worst sort of tumultuous time that any of us can remember probably, this period between let's say March of 2020 and January 6th, 2021, that angsty, tumultuous time corresponds perfectly with the highest ever firearms sales in the United States. Actually, it's not double.

When I entered the firearms industry in 1995, there were about 3.5 million guns sold a year. In 2020, 2021, in any 12-month period, you're going to find evidence of about 22 to 25 million guns sold. So we're talking about a 600% increase.

ASHLEY: Ryan Busse speaking with us on Episode 55 of our show. It was published last April.

RICHARD: And you can hear a longer version of that interview on our podcast website. In fact, you can hear all of our Common Ground conversations at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

ASHLEY: And that's also where you can give us feedback on what you'd like to hear next. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.