


Substantial Disruption



Chalk Silhouettes in the Old Pueblo

By Mike Tully

Tucson has the unwanted distinction of being the location of two mass shootings. The first happened on [October 28, 2002](#) in the University of Arizona College of Nursing when a student shot and killed three of his instructors before taking his own life. That tragic memory was barely fading when, less than a decade later, another mass killing took place. On [January 8, 2011](#), a madman took a firearm to Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords' "Congress on Your Corner" event in front of the Safeway store at Oracle and Ina. He shot the Congresswoman in the head at point blank range, critically wounding her, and killing six others, including Federal Judge John Roll and 9-year old Kristina-Taylor Green. Ron Barber, Giffords' District Director, was also shot but recovered sufficiently to run for and win the congressional seat Giffords vacated as a result of her injuries. (I happened to run into Gabby Giffords at Tucson International Airport a few weeks ago, shortly before a family vacation to Scotland. [She was ebullient and we took photos with her.](#) How often does a vacation highlight take place in the airport terminal?)

America's firearms madness is not defined by well-publicized mass killings in Tucson, Las Vegas, Parkland, Sutherland Springs, and elsewhere. It's defined by one chalk outline at a time, as bullets take lives and limbs on street corners, at parties, in places public and private where a diseased mind, whether from anger, greed, fear or delusion, controls a hand that controls a gun. There are no marches, no editorials, no debates over firearms policies that preside over mayhem – only tears, heartbreak and lingering loss. The family and friends of the victims mourn more quietly, ignored by headlines, but their tears are just as salty, their trauma just as real, the hole in their lives just as cold.

By mid-August of this year the Tucson community had experienced 55 homicides. That's five and a half times the number of fatalities in the two mass shootings combined and [significantly ahead of last year's count](#). In 2017, two-thirds of the homicides resulted from the use of firearms, which is typical. "This may be one of the areas we do struggle, due to the prevalence of guns," Tucson Police Chief Chris Magnus told the *Arizona Daily Star*. Firearms have already killed more than nine thousand people in the United States through the date of this column, including 2,298 kids, according to the [Gun Violence Archive](#). There have been more than 37,000 documented incidents of violent use of firearms. Gun advocates emphasize the need to possess guns for self-defense, yet a mere 1,142 of the incidents involved self-defense. That's only three percent, barely more than the number of unintended shootings (1,082). Those who advocate looser gun laws and more expansive availability of firearms are not advocating self-defense; they advocate for death. Unfortunately, death's advocates have dominated Arizona's mostly Republican legislature for years.

The result: Arizona has the [loosest gun laws in the country](#). That does not make the Grand Canyon State safer: a [recent study by 24/7 Wall Street](#) found that Arizona has the 16th highest gun violence rate in the country. That's consistent with a [study published in May](#) in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* which found a correlation between laws and gun violence:

Strong state firearm policies were associated with lower suicide rates regardless of other states' laws. Strong policies were associated with lower homicide rates, and strong interstate policies were also associated with lower homicide rates, where home state policies were permissive. Strengthening state firearm policies may prevent firearm suicide and homicide, with benefits that may extend beyond state lines.

Arizona, with permissive gun laws, is trending in the wrong direction. The City of Tucson tried to buck the trend by passing a law that provided for the acquisition and destruction of firearms voluntarily turned in for that purpose – sometimes through a buy-back program – or confiscated as the result of a criminal act. Tucson is a chartered city, which purportedly gives it a degree of autonomy under the state Constitution, an example of “local control.” Unfortunately, Arizona’s legislative Republicans define local control as meaning, “if it’s local, we control it” and passed a law that overrides charter autonomy whenever the legislature wants. That resulted in a state known for tourism *promoting littering* by [bullying the City of Bisbee](#) into abandoning a prohibition on plastic bags. The same law [compelled Tucson to give up its efforts](#) to reduce the tsunami of dangerous weapons on its streets and forced the City to sell the guns at auction. The law worked its dark magic; [more than 500 guns were returned to the streets](#) since October. Death’s advocates are effective.

There’s no way to draw a statistical correlation between the guns returned to circulation and the recent spike in the homicide rate. But when the vast majority of homicides are gun-related, it clearly hasn’t helped. Firearms fanatics infest the legislature and relish their victories over those who argue for stricter gun laws in Arizona. We calibrate their victory slowly and painfully, one chalk silhouette at a time.