

Speaker 1: Welcome to Conversations on Health Care. This week, you welcome Pulitzer Prizewinning New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, who's written a compelling piece on how to curtail gun deaths in America. Now, here are your hosts, Mark Masselli and Margaret Flinter.

Mark Masselli: We've had 82 mass shootings in our country so far this year, and the number keeps growing. We've never had so many occur in such a short timeframe, and yet only 53% [00:00:30] of Americans say gun laws should be stricter than they are right now.

Margaret Flinte...: Are there solutions to this crisis? Pulitzer Prizewinning columnist Nicholas Kristof writes in the New York Times about smarter ways to decrease gun deaths, and you're about to hear him explain them.

Mark Masselli: Well, Nick, welcome back to Conversations on Health Care.

Nicholas Kristo...: Great to be with you.

Mark Masselli: Yeah, and really, thank you for joining us from your home in Oregon. It's great. Hopefully the weather's good out there. And you write that in order [00:01:00] to break the gun violence paralysis, we need to focus less on guns and more on those firing them, and you believe that means keeping guns away from risky people. I'm wondering if you could elaborate more on that.

Nicholas Kristo...: Sure. Well, I mean, one statistic that always strikes me, so women over 50 in the US commit fewer than a hundred gun homicides a year. In contrast, men 49 [00:01:30] and under commit more than 500 murders with their hands and fists alone. So essentially, a young man is far more dangerous with his fists than a woman over 50 is in the US. You could pretty much hand out mortars and anti-aircraft guns to women over 50 with no criminal record, and if they didn't share them with the men in their lives, we'd probably be okay. In contrast, pellet guns can [00:02:00] be dangerous with young men.

And so what I think we can do a better job of is limiting access to people. And that's what we do when other harm reduction models. We know that cigarettes are lethal, that alcohol is lethal, and we limit those by age.

I think that there's also ... I mean, age is the obvious way to limit people, and [00:02:30] I think that there is also some possibility of moving politically on that in a country that is very divided. Here in Oregon, you can buy a handgun at 18. This is a very blue state, and yet the age is 18. In Wyoming, one of the most pro-gun states in the country, you have to be 21. And if Wyoming can ... I have this conversation with Second Amendment supporting friends all the time and I say, "Look, if Wyoming can make the minimum age 21, [00:03:00] then surely we can in Oregon as well." And as long as they're over 21, they tend to agree.

Margaret Flinte...: Well, certainly public health initiatives have been front and center in all of our minds throughout the COVID pandemic, so it's an interesting one to follow out how we might take those initiatives and apply them to guns. And the public health initiatives are part about things like age and access, but tell us more, what would your recommendation be for a public health approach to reducing [00:03:30] death from guns?

Nicholas Kristo...: I should say that these aren't my ideas, but ideas I've stolen from other people, including David Hemenway at the Harvard School of Public Health wrote a, what for me was a very influential book, oh, 15 years ago, about addressing gun violence as a public health matter.

And so if you look at other elements of daily life that are dangerous, then we learn to live with them, [00:04:00] but we try to reduce how many people they kill. And so cars are a great example, and cars historically killed more Americans than firearms did. But since over the decades we have built cars to make them safer, so we had padded dashboards, we had seat belts, we had airbags. We submit [00:04:30] cars to all kinds of crash testing to see survivability in a crash. We readjusted highways so we have better lighting. We have those corrugated edges on the highway so you wake up if you're leaving the road. We've done a million ... We've limited access so that young drivers now you get graduated licenses, so you can't have somebody else in them, you maybe can't drive at night.

So we've really taken a evidence- [00:05:00] based approach, a public health approach, to reducing the lethality of vehicles. And in contrast, we haven't done that with firearms. Since 1921, we've reduced the fatality rate of guns per hundred million miles driven by 95%. That's an incredible success. And in the US, in recent years, that has stagnated. European countries have gone well [00:05:30] ahead of us in reducing the fatality rate from motor vehicles. But still, over time, we've done an impressive job, and we haven't taken that public health approach toward guns, and so guns now kill more Americans each year than cars do.

Mark Masselli: Why do you think that? I'm just sort of wondering the ... Obviously the gun advocates go to this, "It's in the constitution, cars aren't in the Constitution," so they're really, they draw their source [00:06:00] of energy from the Constitution, though there's life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. One could make the argument I guess that it includes cars, but it's a little different, isn't it?

Nicholas Kristo...: Well, so people ... Look, I'm speaking to you from rural Oregon on the family farm. I grew up with guns on the farm. I have a firearm. [00:06:30] Everybody around here does and many are very, very strong believers in the Second Amendment.

But what I say is, look, everybody understands that, notwithstanding the Second Amendment, even if you believe, as the Supreme Court now does, that it

confers an individual right to firearms, still, we accept that there are limits, that an individual should not be able to have a cannon, should not be able to have an anti-aircraft weapon. And [00:07:00] so the question then becomes where we draw those lines and what access we provide.

So, in terms of the kinds of weapons, so the United States passed the National Firearms Act, which essentially limits people's access, limits people's ability to buy machine guns. And in general, I think most people, however much they believe in the Second Amendment, are good with that. [00:07:30] And now, in addition, we all recognize that you shouldn't be able to bring your handgun on a public tour of the White House. There are limits in time, place, and manner of how we carry firearms.

So the question, you can believe in the Second Amendment's individual rights and yet still accept that there are going to be limits on what kinds of weapons and where they can be and who gets access and where they can be used. [00:08:00] I actually-

Mark Masselli: And you've praised Governor Newsom for his efforts, and I think that was a ballot initiative to implement background checks on the purchase of ammunition. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about that. That's a state where it made that decision to go forward. Is that how I understand that, how that ammunition ban came forward? And I'm wondering maybe if you could share with us what are some of the early results showing?

Nicholas Kristo...: Yeah. [00:08:30] So California has really been a leader, and Gavin Newsom was one of the architects of that ballot initiative that voters passed easily. And so the idea is that we have universal background checks to ... or in some states, we have universal background checks. In other states, it's a little less universal. But in general, we have background checks to buy a firearm, but you can't really use a firearm unless [00:09:00] you have ammunition. And while the gun may last a hundred years, ammunition, it becomes less reliable after about 20 years and that we may be able to require the same kind of background check to buy ammunition.

So, that's what California did, and what they found is that an awful lot of people try to buy ammunition who can't pass that background check, and in theory, shouldn't have access to a firearm. [00:09:30] So that suggests that it does have some effect.

Of course, people can ask a girlfriend or a boyfriend or a parent or some other friend to buy that ammunition. They can go out of state and carry the ammunition in. There are all kinds of things they can do. But does it help? Yeah, I think it does. And California has also been quite good about gathering data and about trying to get firearms away from people [00:10:00] who are a threat to others or to themselves.

And so if somebody has a domestic violence protection order against them, seems dangerous to their ex, then no place does it perfectly, but in California, it's more likely that there will be an effort to remove guns from that household, from that person, than happens in other states. And all this is imperfect, and one of the ... I mean, we had mass shootings in California, but [00:10:30] if I remember right, the gun homicide rate in California is 28% below the national average, which suggests that there are some lives being saved.

And I guess, in general, I would take that as approximately the margin of lives that can be saved if we use politically plausible measures, that we're not going to eliminate gun violence in America. We have about 400 million guns in this country. There are [00:11:00] going to be a lot of people killed and injured in this country. But I do think that if we take a public health approach, an evidence-based approach, that it's plausible we could reduce that rate by about a third and save maybe 13,000 lives a year. That would be really something.

Mark Masselli: Absolutely.

Margaret Flinte...: Well, I would add to plausible and public health just pragmatic, the ammunition bill that was passed, so thank you for [00:11:30] sharing that with us. And I know, Nick, you're in a position of having to defend your points a lot on this subject. David French wrote a critique in National Review sometime ago about your arguments and says gun advocates like himself have proven they can decrease crime while protecting the Second Amendment, and some people point to the few Research Center reports that the rate of gun deaths today is below levels of the past, which of course completely flies [00:12:00] in the face of what we all are thinking these days as just in the last several days one shooting involving three or four or five fatalities after a row, but what's your response to people who say, actually, they've already shown that they can decrease crime while protecting the Second Amendment?

Nicholas Kristo...: It's true. And I do think that my side, the world of liberals, that we sometimes become too glib about the [00:12:30] perils of guns, and there is a correlation between the number of guns in a society and the number of gun homicides, but it's not a direct correlation. There's a lot of movement there, and it also depends on the age of the society, all kinds of other factors, and any individual car is more likely [00:13:00] to kill somebody than any individual gun.

So it's complicated, but we have regulated cars in ways that do make them, say ... And I guess one other thing that I think that conservatives kind of have a point on is that it's not just about regulating purchase of guns or of ammunition, but policing is also a factor, [00:13:30] and it's one that I think is harder for us liberals to talk about, but there is, in this country, we have a long history of racist policing, but we also have a pretty good evidence base that policing can reduce gun violence, and there have been various studies suggesting that, I think it's roughly every 15 extra police officers can [00:14:00] reduce homicides on average by one.

I think we have to look at both the gun side and the law enforcement side, and also, some things that frankly aren't controversial so we don't talk about. There is good evidence that better lighting in urban areas reduces gun violence, that greening vacant lots reduces gun violence. This is sort of the classic public health approach where you just try a bunch of things, you study [00:14:30] them carefully, you get feedback, you experiment, you do a randomized control trial, and you learn what works and then you invest in the most cost-effective methods, and I don't think we've done enough of that.

Mark Masselli: No, absolutely. Plan, do, study, and act, as we say in the healthcare world, is very important. President Biden has really signed a number of historic executive actions. I think over 20. Enacted the first significant gun safety law in nearly 30 years. [00:15:00] I believe that was signed in June of last year. I'm wondering if you think the administration's approach is working, and certainly, while he did get that piece of legislation through last year, looks less likely with the Republican-controlled House for any future legislation, but what are your thoughts about the work the President has done, and speaking about somebody who understands the value of police, he's certainly one, not to talk about defunding the police, but rather enhancing [00:15:30] their role in the communities.

Nicholas Kristo...: I think that President Biden has done a credible job on both the firearm side and the policing side. I think he has credibility as somebody who has used guns.

I wish that he were, frankly, or the administration were more aggressive on issues like ghost guns. I think that ... Ghost guns are sort of untraceable [00:16:00] guns that are typically made from kits, and if you order the parts of a semi-automatic rifle, I mean, an AR kind of gun, if you order them in parts, you can assemble it yourself and then you have this untraceable gun without a background check. So I think that we could do a better job on that.

But fundamentally, I don't think that the leadership [00:16:30] on gun policy is going to happen at the federal level. I think it's going to happen at this state level. And I think that is going to be much more likely to be true of blue states. Red states may go in the other direction, but I think the real movement is going to be at the state level, and I think the federal government can do more to support the states in trying to figure out how to craft [00:17:00] limits on ghost guns or on 3D printers, for example, that produce guns that perhaps can pass a metal detector.

Mark Masselli: Is there anybody doing, just finding the seam of opportunity between the right and the left on the conversation around guns, is there anything out there that you'd sort of say, "Hey, this portends for something that might be very helpful in this larger conversation at the state level, local level, where people [00:17:30] are trying to have a conversation about what are the right things to do"?

Nicholas Kristo...: Boy, I wish there were more of that. I mean, I think that that has been really hard and guns is one of these toxic issues that has been really hard to have those bridges, and people also tend to live in kind of segregated worlds that either they and their friends don't have a gun in the household or they and their friends all do, [00:18:00] and the conversations are really difficult.

I must say that I've kind of gone out of my way to have those discussions, and I have found that it is possible, but social psychologists talk about complexifying an issue to try to bridge these to make these discussions. So I don't sit down with somebody who's very passionate about gun [00:18:30] rights and an NRA member, and I don't ask about the Second Amendment. I don't ask about ending access to handguns, for example. But I talk about these very specific issues. I complexify it.

So, for example, as I said, the Wyoming has a minimum age of 21 to buy a handgun. In Oregon, should we maybe raise the age too? And people are willing to have that discussion. [00:19:00] I say, "Look, we all recognize that when somebody has a domestic violence protection order against them, they're at a great danger to themselves and to their ex. Should we limit their ability to buy a firearm or ammunition? Should we try to make sure that they don't have access to guns in that period? What about somebody who talks about self-harm? Should we try to remove guns from that household?"

And again, people are willing to have that [00:19:30] conversation. Safe storage is something that people are more nervous about. I mean, a lot of people think that they're going to protect their home if they have a home bristling with guns, and I find that when I present the data on that, that actually a gun in the home is more likely to lead to a death in that home than its absence, but people are will ... For example, I mean, one of the things that President Biden once said that got him in trouble with both left and right was [00:20:00] he said, he advised people to get a shotgun, and if there's a potential home invasion, you just shoot out the window a couple of times, and everybody hated him for that remark. But if more people had a shotgun at home than had a 9mm handgun, we'd be in so much better shape.

And I always tell my friends that when I ... I'm a backpacker, when I backpack through Grizzly Country, I take bear spray because you're better off statistically [00:20:30] with bear spray than with a firearm to repel a grizzly bear, and my bet is that bear spray might be more effective against an intruder, against a home invasion, than a firearm would be, and I'd be less likely to end up dead. Some states limit access to bear spray. We don't think of bear spray as a public health intervention, but we just need to kind of think in creative [00:21:00] ways, again, along the lines of harm reduction.

Margaret Flinte...: Well, I couldn't agree with you more about the need to simplify some of this, so I have to say that the simplest message perhaps that I would put on the table for people is the report from the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence

Solutions that showed the burden on young people. And this is hard to even say, that gun violence is now the leading cause of death for young children and teenagers in the United States. Gun [00:21:30] violence is the leading cause of death. I think we've got to get people's attention around that and in a way that nobody wants to see young people die from gun violence.

And then you talk about the strategies, and you mentioned one of them, requiring people to lock up their weapons, right? Holding them responsible maybe if they do not, and we certainly have read the tragic stories of kids getting their hands on them or accidental [00:22:00] discharge. I'm also remembering certain states, I believe, that really went strongly against the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendation that we include in our well-child visits in primary care a simple thing from your trusted, hopefully, physician or nurse practitioner in a well-child visit saying, "Do you have guns in the home? And if so, are they secured and locked up?" And legislation was passed to make that something you couldn't do.

What's your answer to people who can't [00:22:30] even get behind what would seem like very pragmatic, simple ways to keep young people from dying by gun violence?

Nicholas Kristo...:

Well, and your comment about physicians I think is absolutely right, that where clinical health and public health come together, that's when a trusted doctor asks people about whether they're drinking too much alcohol, whether there is a drug issue, [00:23:00] various other risky behaviors, including having a gun in the home that maybe loaded and kept on the shelf, and so I am such a believer in that kind of a conversation. It's a difficult conversation, partly because this country is so polarized and so toxic.

I do think that one of the things that my world of liberals can [00:23:30] do to make those conversations more possible is to lower the temperature a little bit and talk less about banning guns, and I never talk about gun control, I talk about gun safety and acknowledging that, look, we're going to have a lot of guns in this country, but there may be some steps we can take that will leave the country safer.

[00:24:00] And also if we're willing to touch the law enforcement side of that, I think that builds some space to, again, lower the toxicity here to some degree. We're never going to win over every person, but it does help that the NRA seems to be collapsing. I do think that there are an awful lot of Americans, including those on the center and right, who [00:24:30] recognize that we have a horrific firearm violence problem.

Unfortunately, the solution that they've grabbed onto is to go buy a firearm themselves for self-defense, and women in particular are now more likely to buy weapons. To me, that's exactly the wrong conclusion, but it does mean that I think there are plenty of people who are less ideological and more willing to talk

about, okay, maybe they've bought [00:25:00] a weapon, but maybe we can convince them to keep it in a gun safe in the house, or at least to put a trigger lock on it with a code, whatever it may be.

We don't really know, but we think there are about 300,000 firearms stolen each year in the US. 300,000. And those are guns who were going to the hands of various bad actors and often used in dangerous ways, and [00:25:30] that's because we don't have more guns stored in gun safes, for example.

Mark Masselli: Nick, let me shift gears a little. We know you as a prolific journalist and opinion leader. Some of us would've liked to see you as a governor in Oregon, but that didn't happen. But you weigh in on issues from US domestic issues to international conflicts. I'm wondering if you might share some of your thoughts about, we're coming up to the one-year anniversary of the war in Ukraine, [00:26:00] and then also I know you have some reflections maybe on President Carter as he's taking hospice at home at this point.

Nicholas Kristo...: Sure. So I guess on Ukraine, I would make the point that this is where I think values and interests align, that what Russia is doing in Ukraine [00:26:30] is engaging in war crimes, crimes against humanity. I talked to people who had been tortured and raped and civilian buildings attacked. Hundreds of medical facilities have been attacked. And I think President Biden should provide more weaponry, and more advanced weaponry in particular, [00:27:00] long range precision weaponry so that the Ukrainians could hit Crimea, and both the land bridge that gives Russians access to Crimea and the Sea Bridge, the Kerch Bridge, that enables them to resupply their bases there.

I think that if the Ukrainians could put more pressure on Crimean Russian bases there, that will make Putin realize he's not going to win this war and will make it easier to have realistic peace negotiations. So [00:27:30] I'd like to see F-16s provided to Ukraine, ATACMS, long range missiles, Gray Eagle, drones, and continue the intelligence sharing, and so on.

On Jimmy Carter, I mean, what a hero of public health. I tend to think that his presidency was actually better than a lot of people think. I think he did a lot of really hard, difficult [00:28:00] things like the Panama Canal Treaty, like, well, the Camp David-

Mark Masselli: Camp David. Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah.

Nicholas Kristo...: ... Middle East Peace Awards, and he was one of the first to talk about green energy in an important way. He elevated human rights in a way they never had been elevated in this country. So I would be a defender of his presidency.

But if you also look at what he is done after that, river blindness, I've traveled a lot in West [00:28:30] Africa. There were vast, vast swaths of countries like Burkina Faso where nobody could live or farm because of river blindness. And

it's not being eradicated, but it's declined by, I don't know, 95% or something. Guinea worm disease used to affect three million people a year, and now we're ... I think that last year there were about 15 cases or something, maybe 13 cases in humans [00:29:00] all over the world, mostly in South Sudan, and that's because of Jimmy Carter.

I mean, the way he has improved the lives of so many people in so much of the world is I think just extraordinary. And I've met a lot of ... One of the great things about the columnist gig is I've met a lot of extraordinary people, presidents and kings and Nobel Peace Prize winners, [00:29:30] but it's hard to think of anybody who is as fundamentally good and has impacted more lives for a longer period than this one term president who was, afterward, pretty much abandoned by his own party.

Margaret Flinte...: Well, we talked about some tough topics this morning, so thank you for that note about somebody who really brought so much good to the world, and I think out of recognition for his commitment to [00:30:00] children and to families, I want to give you an opportunity to talk about a topic that I know you've got some strong thoughts on, you and your wife, Sheryl WuDunn, who we had on the show with you I think the last time you visited us, wrote a terrific book a couple of years ago called *A Path Appears: Transforming Lives, Creating Opportunity*, and it told the story of a program we're quite well aware of that's been around for a couple of decades, the nonprofit Nurse-Family Partnership, which has [00:30:30] been clearly shown to make a difference in the lives of babies and new parents. It's one of several programs that do this, but it has a long track record and Congress has just renewed funding for these home visiting programs. Share your perspective. Why are these so important? What do they contribute to a good and healthful society?

Nicholas Kristo...: One of the revolutions in trying to deal with social problems is that we used to have arguments and now we have [00:31:00] evidence. And one of the areas of evidence that has emerged most strongly is the importance of early childhood, really beginning in pregnancy through three or five. And it's not that later years don't matter, they do. But those early years when the brain is developing really matter. And beginning in pregnancy, if a mom [00:31:30] is abusing alcohol or drugs, that will have effects long after that for that child. Smoking also has deleterious effects.

And in general, our interventions are mostly after a kid is five or six and enters the public school system, and so Nurse-Family Partnership works with a mom beginning in pregnancy [00:32:00] through age two. And at first, it was hard for me to see how it could have all these effects years later, less contact for that child with the criminal justice system, more likely to graduate from high school, less likely to be pregnant as a teenager, years later earning more income, and now I think we see that pathway more clearly, that if [00:32:30] you can reduce ACEs, adverse childhood experiences, if you can reduce trauma in early childhood, then there's less cortisol flooding in the child's brain in ways that

seem to affect brain architecture and put that child on a kind of a hair trigger fight or flight response.

And whether that's ... That's probably part of the path pathway, there may be others as well, but we now understand that these home visiting programs, [00:33:00] the question isn't whether we can afford to invest in them. It's whether we can afford not to invest in them. And so often, we as a country, we just fail to put our money in programs that have such a great evidence background and can do so much good.

Mark Masselli: Oh, great. Nick, thank you for returning our program, and we always appreciate your insight and critical thinking on such a wide range of topics. And [00:33:30] thanks to our audience, there's more online about Conversations on Health Care, including a way to sign up for our email updates at our website, chcradio.com. Thank you, again. We appreciate it.

Nicholas Kristo...: Great to be with you.

Mark Masselli: Alrighty, great. Ciao.