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Reducing Citizen and Child Mass Shootings in the United States Using the Best Knowledge, Experience, and Practices From Conflict Resolution

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by [Juliana Birkhoff](#)

December 2012

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Last Friday, mediators joined other citizens in the United States as they sat in shock and cried for the 26 people Adam Lanza killed in Sandy Hook, CT. Over the weekend, mediators hugged their children and friends, posted messages in Facebook, and called their families. On Monday, mediators commuted to work thinking, "What can we do"? Mediators study how grievances escalate to disputes, how violence erupts, and what are the social control mechanisms in healthy societies to maintain order and promote health. From that research we have learned how to reduce conflict and violence. We design and conduct processes to mediate disputes, develop healthy organizations that respect people and value their input, develop long-term peace building processes. Our experience over the last thirty years is not often called on in national crisis-but we actually know what to do.

All week mediators have watched and read the discussions and disagreements about how many guns, do gun control laws reduce mass shootings, are mass shootings more common, are shooters mentally ill, etc. I have had conversations with other professional mediators about a response to the kind of violence we experienced in Sandy Hook, CT. We have watched and discussed advocacy, mental health, and cultural change responses. From all of these conversations I have distilled a conflict resolution response to mass shootings. I do not

pretend that I or anyone else has the influence to convene, organize, or resource the response-but I want to let people know that we actually do know what to do. If each organization took on the conflict resolution process and strategy that they can—we could reduce mass shootings. I know that we know how to do this.

1) Work with the Institute of Medicine, National Science Foundation, or the National Academy of Science to conduct joint fact finding on what we know and do not know about the causes, triggers, and public policy responses to mass shootings.

Several reports synthesized research on mass shootings after the Aurora Colorado murders. There is research that demonstrates correlations between the number of guns and the number of homicides. Some research correlates gun control policies with reductions in gun violence. However, critics argue that the studies are small, inconclusive, demonstrate correlation not causes, and there are other studies or countries that opponents use as counterfactuals. Policy makers cannot go against public opinion and well-funded advocacy campaigns unless they have sound empirical research. Mediators have been conducting joint fact finding collaborative processes for 25 years to produce consensus on policy, policy experiments, and research agendas. We have had remarkable success developing research on natural

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research agendas. We have had remarkable success developing research on natural resource, environmental, and public health issues.

2) Convene a policy dialogue to develop consensus on policy options to reduce mass shootings.

Vice-President Biden will produce several policy options in January for congressional deliberation, however, it likely that the only policies that will pass political party divisions will be the reinstatement of the assault weapon ban, prohibitions against large ammunition magazines, and background checks at gun fairs. For most Americans these policies will assuage their immediate calls for action. These policies may indeed reduce the number of people killed in mass shootings and the incidence of mass shootings. However, it is possible that even those few reforms cannot be passed in the divided legislature and other more preventative policies may not be considered. Mediators have been conducting consensus building policy dialogues for 25 years. Policy dialogues have created consensus on health policies, environmental regulations, natural resource policies, public health, education, and financial policies. We know how to convene the right policy makers, how to conduct technical, or issue work groups to develop options, and how to build consensus on complex and divisive issues.

3) Convene a Values Dialogue between gun control advocates and second amendment advocates.

Why is there so much division, distrust, and hatred between advocates of gun control and the Second Amendment? Convening and conducting a dialogue between gun control and Second Amendment advocates can help these groups learn what is at issue and what is underneath the passion in their differences. When mediators hear divisive and escalatory rhetoric, we know that people feel their values and identity are at risk. Mediators have been conducting dialogues on divisive issues for years, not to develop agreements but to increase

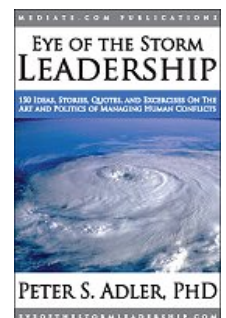
understanding and open a path for respectful communication. Mediators have conducted dialogues about abortion, immigration, Muslim Christian differences, and use of restraints in mental hospitals, ordination of women, gay and lesbian marriage, and child labour. We know how to conduct these dialogues and have significantly improved the climate around divisive issues through our careful leadership.

4) Conduct religious organization, neighbourhood, and community conversations about guns, safety, and freedom.

Citizens across the United States are worried about crime and safety as well as limits on their freedom from gun control legislation. While some citizens will be satisfied with small immediate reforms, many will continue to worry about the safety of their children and communities. Their responses may include advocating for armed guards in schools, arming volunteer community patrols, moving to gated communities, as well as anti-bullying education, constructing safe community space, and anti-gang work. Mediators and collaborative leaders have been conducting community conversations on divisive issues for 25 years. We have developed organizing tools, conversation guides, facilitators training, and conversation how to's. Community conversations and study circles can reduce dis-information, improve perceptions of each other, and narrow disagreements on options. When community conversations are well led and resourced, they can also create common visions and plans. Creating community conversation and study circle tool kits on gun violence can reduce citizen despair and (re)create moral consensus around violence and freedom.

5) Conduct city or regional dialogues that integrate options from neighborhood and community conversations into city and regional approaches.

Local conversations help communities learn about each other, reestablish community norms, and reduce misperceptions. To develop policy options, city or regional dialogues could develop local ordinances, policies, education, and mental health programs. While national joint fact-finding and dialogues may take a year to develop consensus on national approaches, city and regions can advance local priorities with more speed. Mayors, police departments, and mental health providers have already been meeting to develop responses to mass shootings. Cities and regions often serve as public policy laboratories for policy change and pilot programs. Mediators have developed effective tools to organize and conduct large dialogues that enable learning, develop policy options, and create convergence on solutions. Mediators and



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collaborative leaders have conducted city and regional dialogues on a wide range of public problems. Over the years, the techniques have spread beyond mediators to a wide range of engagement professionals.

As mediators, we know that complex conflicts involve different values, threats to identity, lack of information or disagreement over information, destructive structures and forum shopping, as well as different interests and relationship issues. Although, we rarely develop comprehensive conflict resolution processes that address all conflict causes, mediators and peace builders could communicate, collaborate, and organize ourselves around our individual and organizational strengths to address mass shooting. If I close my eyes in hope, I can see the large public policy mediation organizations conducting joint fact-finding and policy dialogues with a wide range of health, government agency, and civil society leaders. I see public engagement organizations convening and leading city and regional dialogues to develop local solutions. Still with my eyes closed, I see people sitting in living rooms, churches, synagogues, and mosques talking about their fears and hope for their children. Finally, I see our bravest mediators sitting with the most passionate advocates about the causes that they care about so much that they can demonize each other. I know that mediators can lead us out of the policy confusion and despair we are in right now. I don't worry that one of us will have to do everything, but I do want each of us to convene our network, organize the process we can from our standpoint and work with stakeholders to reduce mass shootings in the United States.



Biography

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Juliana E. Birkhoff is an experienced mediator, facilitator, trainer, and conflict resolution scholar. She focuses her practice on complex scientific and technical problems about water quality and quantity, watershed planning and restoration, land use and development, pesticides and chemicals policies and community right to know issues, and other natural resources and public health issues.

She has conducted extensive research on collaboration and consensus building. Her previous research include best practices for integrating complex scientific and technical information into collaborative processes, how to integrate scientific and community knowledge in consensus-building, and several evaluations of consensus building processes.

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Jack , Gilbert AZ
Next

12/30/12

Hopefully there will be enough presence of mind to consider what's next after gun banning works. For example recipes for the fabrication of Improvised Explosive Devices and Suicide

the fabrication of Improvised Explosive Devices and Suicide Vests can be easily found on the internet. Presuming, of course, that the objective is to reduce violence rather than just reducing guns.

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Deri , Sarasota FL

12/30/12

reL forgot one other idea

Received a grant from the Florida Academy for Professional Mediators to implement a study circle on healing racism at a local high school after a shooting took place at a local movie theatre. A report and studies were done to show the decreased violence on the campus at Sarasota High School as reported by their Vice Principal, Dr. Cale.

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Deri Ronis, Sarasota FL

drderi33@gmail.com 12/30/12

regarding your article above

I just wanted to share that I wrote a letter to Pres. Obama, Vice Pres. Biden, the Director of the U.S. Dept. of Education recommending that conflict resolution curriculum and peer mediation programs be implemented via a mandate in all schools K-12 throughout the U.S. Parents, teachers, and administrators would also be involved in the conflict resolution curriculum. If we hope to change a culture of violence to one of peace, we have to start somewhere. One of the schools I was involved with in Delray Beach, FL., Toussaint L'Ouverture High School for Arts and Social Justice was the only High School in Palm Beach County to receive the Peaceful Schools International Award from Nova Scotia, Canada. We had a fully operational peer mediation program and this same program was done as a pilot at two other area schools via a grant from the U.S. Dept. of Education - time to mobilize into action and do the research after the programs have been implemented. Also, mental health evaluation for all gun owners.

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