

2014

Police Officers Talking About Gun Control: A Case Study of a Rural Sheriff's Department

Angela Sycrafoose
West Virginia University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Sycrafoose, Angela, "Police Officers Talking About Gun Control: A Case Study of a Rural Sheriff's Department" (2014). *Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports*. 366.
<https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd/366>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by the The Research Repository @ WVU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you must obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in WVU Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports collection by an authorized administrator of The Research Repository @ WVU. For more information, please contact researchrepository@mail.wvu.edu.

**Police Officers Talking About Gun Control: A Case Study of a Rural Sheriff's
Department**

Angela Sycrafoose

**Thesis submitted to the College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University**

**in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

**Master of Arts
in
Sociology**

**Rachael Woldoff, Ph.D., Chair
Corey Colyer, Ph.D.
Jesse Wozniak, Ph.D.**

Department of Sociology

**Morgantown, WV
2014**

**Keywords: gun control, police officers, work, firearms, safety, rural,
community, identity**

Copyright 2014 Angela Sycrafoose

ABSTRACT

Police Officers Talking About Gun Control: A Case Study of a Rural Sheriff's Department

By Angela Sycamore

This research examines how members of a rural police department view gun control, and the degree to which they think that gun control laws protect police officers and the public. Drawing on conclusions from interviews with twenty police officers within one local sheriff's department, three themes emerged: 1) the officers rejected gun control laws and deemed them ineffective for controlling criminal behavior; 2) the officers showed support for specific gun control measures such as, citizens obtaining concealed carry permits and expanding gun background checks; 3) the officers deemed guns to be an essential part of rural upbringing and identity. We concluded that based upon the officers conflicting views that there is conflict between the multiple identities the officers have. First, officers' identify as rural gun owners, who because of their upbringing see the symbolic value of gun ownership. Second, the officers identify as law enforcement officials and see the practicality of owning guns, but also see the flaws in current gun legislation. The study concludes by discussing the importance for politicians when creating future gun legislation to recognize the differences in rural and urban gun cultures.

Keywords: gun control, police officers, work, firearms, safety, rural, community, identity

To all the men and women of law enforcement and all the victims of gun violence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support of many people. The person I would like to thank first is my thesis chair, Dr. Rachael A. Woldoff, who read, edited, and helped with revisions of numerous editions of the thesis. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Jesse Wozniak, and Dr. Corey Colyer, who offered guidance and support along the way. A special thanks goes out to all the police officers that allowed me to interview them as part of this project and for their efforts in keeping the community they police safe. I would also like to recognize the secretary and Officers Kent and Matthew for all their help in the recruitment of officers at the department. Finally, I would like to thank my fiancé, my parents, and numerous friends and family who endured this long process with me, I would not be where I am today without them always offering support and love throughout the entire process.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	2
History and Context of Gun Control in America.....	2
Characteristics of Gun Owners and Non-gun Owners.....	3
Rural Culture, Ideology, Identity, and Policing.....	4
Police Officers’ Views on Gun Control.....	7
Methods.....	10
Setting: A Small Rural Sheriff’s Department in West Virginia.....	11
Data Collection.....	13
Participant Characteristics.....	13
Table 1: Police Officers Interviewed.....	14
Data Analysis.....	15
Findings.....	16
Theme 1.....	17
Theme 2.....	25
Theme 3.....	34
Discussion.....	47
References.....	52
Appendix 1.....	63
Appendix 2.....	64

INTRODUCTION

Gun control laws became a highly debated topic in the United States, in the aftermath of the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting in Connecticut, in which an armed man entered an elementary school and killed twenty children and six adults, with many citizens urging the government to take action to strengthen gun control laws. A 2013 poll showed that 54% of the general public agrees that stricter gun laws would reduce the number of deaths caused by mass shootings (Pew Research Center 2013). On the other hand, the FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) recorded its all-time busiest week of operation, running over 900,000 checks on individuals purchasing guns following Sandy Hook (FBI 2013). Politicians are split on gun control, with most Democrats supporting stricter gun laws, and most Republicans against any gun law reform (United States Senate 2013). Though researchers have studied the political dimensions of gun control and public opinion on the topic, far less is known about what police officers think about gun control laws.

Within the last five years, a total of 266 police officers have been killed in the line of duty by gunfire (Officers Down Memorial Page 2013). Police One (2013), an advertisement-supported website that claims to provide an online environment for law enforcement officers, conducted a non-scientific survey examining police officer attitudes toward gun control and found that, "America's law enforcers put little faith in the effectiveness of proposed gun-control legislation." But why do police officers have little faith in gun legislation? To answer this and gain a deeper understanding of why police officers are for or against gun control laws, we interviewed police officers from a rural sheriff's department in West Virginia and observed these officers in their role as crime control agents. The two questions we have attempted to answer are: 1) what are rural police officers views on gun legislation, and 2) how are they tied to rural

culture, ideology and identity? In the following section, we highlight the literature on gun legislation, characteristics of gun owners and non-gun owners, rural policing, rural ideology, rural identity, and police officer views on gun control.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History and Context of Gun Control in America

Gun control has been defined as “government regulations meant to influence the availability and use of firearms in the civilian populations (Carter 2006:366).” Historically, legislation of this kind has been difficult for government to pass, in part because gun rights were written into the Constitution under the Second Amendment’s “right to bear arms, wherein a well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people, to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.”

Indeed, the United States maintains a gun culture, when compared to other economically developed democratic nations; the United States has considerably weaker gun laws (Carter 2006). The Pew Research Center (2013), estimated that the United States has between 270 million and 310 million non-military guns. Having a large number of guns paired with weak gun regulation leads to higher incidence of gun violence (Violence Policy Center 2013). Congress has passed many known gun control laws following high-profile incidents like assassinations of politicians, school shootings, and mass shootings in public places (Carter 2006). (Table 1 provides a brief explanation of some of the most important gun legislation over the years).

In January 2013, following the Sandy Hook shooting, President Barack Obama proposed gun control legislation to push for more restrictive gun laws and created what he called “a plan to protect our children and our communities by reducing gun violence (Obama 2013).” He proposed closing background check loopholes by requiring background checks for all gun sales

in order to keep guns out of the hands of “irresponsible and dangerous individuals”, banning military-style assault weapons and high capacity magazines, making schools safer by adding more school resource officers, and increasing access to mental health professionals (Obama 2013), however the plan failed to pass through Congress. About 71% of Democrats polled say it is essential for Congress and the president to act on gun legislation, while 53% of Republicans polled say that no action at all should be taken on gun legislation (Pew Research Center 2013). Still, public opinion polls show that the general public supports stricter gun laws. According to the Pew Research Center (2013), 81% of people support making private gun sales and sales at gun shows subject to background checks, 66% support a federal gun database, and 54% support an assault weapons ban. In addition, 63% of the public opposes having teachers and school officials being armed in schools. These divisions exist based partially on whether the person owns gun or not.

Characteristics of Gun Owners and Non-gun Owners

The Pew Research Center found that in August of 1999, following the Columbine shooting, 49% of people surveyed owned guns for hunting, and only 26% owned them for protection. However, by February of 2013, following the shootings in Aurora, Colorado and Sandy Hook Elementary, 48% of people surveyed owned a gun for protection, and only 32% owned a gun for hunting (Pew Research Center 2013), suggesting that protection has now become the main motivator for those buying guns. Gun owners who belong to the National Rifle Association (NRA) believe that it is more important to protect gun rights than to control gun ownership. However, 74% of NRA-member households supported expanding background checks for private gun sales (Pew Research Center 2013). Those who personally own a gun often

feel safer and claim that owning guns is something they enjoy (Pew Research Center 2013).¹

In contrast, non-gun owners in 2013 said that they would feel uncomfortable with a gun in the house and would be worried about accidents (Pew Research Center 2013). Sixty-six percent of non-gun owners reported that it was more important to control gun ownership than to protect gun rights (Pew Research Center 2013). Many of those who live in non-gun households believe that stricter gun control laws would give the government too much power, but those same people supported universal background checks, banning assault-style weapons, and high-capacity ammunition clips.

Rural Culture, Ideology, Identity and Policing

The current study is an examination of rural police officers' views on gun control, so it is important to examine what ideologies they hold that are related to rural culture and identity. People from rural areas often disdain city life and view rural and small town life as superior (Hummon 1990). Rural and small town enthusiasts have been known to hold an idealized view of the country as quiet, slow, easy-going, friendly, and safe (Hummon 1990). This type of thinking or ideology often leads the residents to characterize cities as too large, crowded, unfriendly, and artificial (Hummon 1990). Rural residents often believe that they live in the best form of community with an emphasis on personal relations, where "everybody knows everybody," and where, some would argue, "everybody knows everybody's business" (Hummon 1990). These residents see cities as the opposite, places where "no one knows anybody" (Hummon 1990).

Small towns are common places for hunting, fishing, and outdoor activities, so guns are often more common in rural areas (Bristow 1982). More than double the number of rural

¹ In terms of set differences, 43% of female gun owners in 1999 owned a gun for protection, while, 55% of males in Men and women agree that no states should be allowed to ignore federal gun laws (Pew Research Center 2013).

residents own guns than urban residents, and gun rights are cherished (Johnson 2013). Guns are a part of rural identity that is best described as knowing that it is “increasingly important to not just own guns, but to display them and aggressively defend their ownership; it is important to drive a truck as much for what it says about you as for the service and utility it provides, and it is important to listen to country music in which the cultural value of these symbols is reinforced” (Ching and Creed 1997). These messages about rural identity could be seen as symbolic linkages that exist between and among people in rural areas that are enactments of their identities (Hecht 1993). Therefore, it is important to talk about Hecht’s (1993) relational frame of identity, where identities emerge because of relationships to other people (family or gun owners), identities are enacted in relationships, and relationships then develop identities as social entities. This rural context, in which officers are widely known, makes it hard for police officers to juggle their multiple identities. They must first enact the identity as a police officer and enforcer of the laws, second as a rural gun owner and outstanding citizen, third potentially as a father or husband, because they are juggling multiple identities conflict can occur between their views.

A vast majority of rural residents also belong to the National Rifle Association, which was founded to protect Second Amendment rights and promote gun-safety training (Head 2013). However, while rural residents are more likely to own guns, they are also less likely to use a gun in the commission of a crime (Weisheit et al. 1994). The Pew Research Center found that in 2013, 59% of rural households owned guns and 39% of those surveyed lived in a rural area (Pew Research Center 2013). Informal control is valued in rural areas where “people control their own” and often distrust the government, distrust outsiders, and are reluctant to share internal problems. Individuals who do not rely on law enforcement for providing protection purchase many guns to achieve “individualistic” goals of protecting themselves and their families (Celinska 2007). In

rural counties guns mean a source of “father and son bonding,” while in cities guns mean crime (Johnson 2013). It makes sense that rural ideology would play a part in rural policing and how police officers view gun control.

Sheriff’s offices are a typical form of rural police agency and are responsible for the local jail, court security, prisoner transport, process serving, issuing concealed carry permits, and patrolling the county. Sheriffs are elected officials who typically serve four-year terms (National Sheriffs’ Association 2013). Sheriffs have to be responsive to the community or risk not get re-elected for another term, so politics play a factor in the reactions and attitudes of county sheriffs’ departments. Some have called the rural sheriff the “most powerful politician in the county” (Walker and Katz 2011:69).

The stereotypical rural police agency is a small sheriff’s office similar to the fictional television program “The Andy Griffith Show” which depicts an office with only two officers and very little crime. However, it is important to note that 90% of police departments in the United States have less than 50 sworn police officers (Weisheit et al. 1994).² The fewer police officers located in rural places means that response times for calls of service can be long making it difficult for small rural agencies to cover their areas at any given time (Weisheit et al. 1994).

According to Oliver (2004), rural police officers face four unique stressors. First, rural places are often geographically isolated, so officers are often alone and backup could take up to an hour to arrive, thus incidents ranging from a routine traffic stop to a domestic violence call can present risk. Second, economic constraints, such as low pay and inadequate equipment and training are especially problematic. Some rural police officers have cars without radar and without a barrier separating the police officer and the arrestee, and with out a computer, leaving

² Other kinds of rural police officers are state police, United States Park Police, Indian Police, Harbor, Lake and River Police and some other federal, state and local agencies located in rural areas (Bristow 1982).

officers at the mercy of the dispatcher and causing delays. Third, social factors present harm to rural police officers, such as the “fishbowl” effect that occurs from living in a place where citizens personally know the police officers and scrutinize them. Rural police officers must be especially careful of public behaviors because their activities can become public knowledge, reducing police effectiveness in the jurisdiction (Bristow 1982). Finally, inactivity is a common fact of life for rural police officers, as these communities have fewer calls and fewer incidents that involve pulling people over, so they often experience long periods of inactivity and boredom (Oliver 2004).

Typically, rural police officers serve in locations where crime rates are relatively low and where residents are reluctant to call the police (Oliver 2004). Still, rural police officers face unique obstacles that urban police officers do not. For instance, they often handle agricultural and wildlife crime, ranging from poaching to fruit, timber and pesticide thefts (Bristow 1982). Substance abuse is higher in rural areas, and driving under the influence is more common (Weisheit et al. 1994). Also, rural areas are often production sites for methamphetamine and marijuana, and many serve as trans-shipment points for drugs destined to urban areas (Weisheit et al. 1994). Homicide, rape, and assault are more likely to occur among acquaintances in rural areas, where identifying a criminal is easier, as sheriffs and local police officers often know offenders and their families and where to find them (Weisheit et al. 1994). In the next section we discuss the literature on police officers' views on gun control, where we see a vast difference between urban police officers and rural police officers.

Police Officers' Views on Gun Control

Previous research finds that the general public supports stricter gun laws, but few studies have investigated police officers' views and how place affects their views. New York City

Mayor Michael Bloomberg (2013), in talking about police officers said, “They have dedicated their lives to protecting the public, and as Congress debates our nation’s gun laws, their voices deserve to be heard.” Police officers have varying opinions on gun control, depending on rank, geographical location, and other factors.

Though not scientific, the Police One survey³, which asked “self-identified” law enforcement officials 27 questions relating to their opinions on gun control, found that when respondents were asked, “If you were a sheriff or a chief, how would you respond to more restrictive gun laws?” Forty-four percent said they would not enforce more restrictive laws and join the public with a vocal opposition effort (Police One 2013). Of the 15,000 “self-identified” police officers, 60.6% thought that the passage of the White House’s current proposed legislation would have no effect on improving police officer safety (Police One 2013). In addition, 95% of respondents reported that a federal ban on the manufacture and sale of magazines that hold more than ten rounds would not reduce violent crime (Police One 2013). Approximately 28% of the respondents said that more *permissive* concealed carry permits would prevent large-scale shootings in public (Police One 2013), and 80% supported arming schoolteachers who volunteer to train with firearms and carry them on the job (Police One 2013). Respondents were split, when asked if citizens should be required to complete a safety-training course before being allowed to buy a gun, with 42% stating that citizens should be required to take a gun-safety course for all weapons purchased and 43% saying that citizens should not be required to take a safety class before buying a gun.(Police One 2013). Ultimately, the respondents in this survey thought that

³ In March of 2013, Police One conducted a non-scientific survey, asking law enforcement officials about their views on gun control. The website claims that the 15,000 survey respondents were “verified” law enforcement officials, but Glenn Kessler (2013) of the *Washington Post*, found that the survey was an “opt-in” survey, promoted on the website and through email to 260,000 newsletter subscribers. The qualifying question that asked if the respondent was a current or former law enforcement official was meant to select only those connected law enforcement (Kessler 2013). Also, it is possible those who oppose gun control were more motivated to take the survey because of the way the website promoted it (Kessler 2013).

the reason for gun violence in the United States was from a decline in parenting and family values (Police One 2013).

Two large police organizations disagree on gun control: the Major Cities Chiefs Association and the Major County Sheriff's Association (Johnson 2013). The Major County Sheriff's Association, believes that an assault weapons ban will not reduce gun violence, does not support banning high capacity magazines, and expresses support for helping those with mental health issues, and believes that youth are immersed in a culture of violence with video games (Stanek 2013). However, the Chiefs of Police, show strong support for an assault weapons ban, stating a need to act now to close background check loopholes and a belief that state governments should maintain their ability to legislate concealed carry laws. A third organization the Constitutional Sheriff's and Peace Officers Association, has 479 sheriffs', six of whom are from West Virginia (Boone, Hardy, Logan, Raleigh, Roane, and Wood Counties) and oppose President Obama's gun control plan, while only five police chiefs openly opposed it, including one from Missouri, one from Ohio, two from Pennsylvania, and one from West Virginia (Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association 2013).

In, Kanawha County, West Virginia Sheriff Johnny Rutherford, who oversees the state's most populated county, did not want to weigh in on the legislation, saying to reporters, "We're going to enforce the laws, whatever the laws are," he said. "I'm not going to get into the politics of it. Our job is to enforce the laws and make our community safe" (Associated Press 2013). Media reports also suggest that some rural police officers are opposed to the proposed gun legislation. According to the *Cumberland Times-News*, in West Virginia sheriffs in Boone, Roane, and Wood counties, signed a petition against the federal government if Congress passed gun control laws. These are three extremely rural counties in West Virginia totaling 128,000

residents.⁴ One sheriff in Raleigh County, West Virginia has said, “It’s not the gun’s fault people are shooting each other, blaming the gun is ridiculous” (Associated Press 2013).

In urban areas, where most gun crimes occur, police officers are more likely to speak out about these issues (Johnson 2013). Peter Moskos (2008), author of *Cop in the Hood*, wrote: “When gunfire is occurring police officers make attractive targets.” From his brief experience as a police officer in Baltimore’s eastern district, he thinks that because of the sheer number of guns, that there is a need for gun control laws and supports the idea of such laws. He is not alone in the law enforcement community. The Los Angeles Police Chief has supported a ban on high capacity ammunition magazines (Watkins 2011).

Previous research on police officers and their views on gun control is limited. While the Police One survey asked police officers about gun control, it failed to examine causes. Our study addresses rural ideology, rural identity, and rural culture and how these play a factor in the views of rural police officers from a local sheriff’s department in West Virginia.

METHODS

In exploring the differences in the opinions of rural police officers, our goal was to analyze the officers’ experiences, meanings, interpretations, and interactions that they correlated with their views on gun control (Weiss 1994:1). The initial step in our study was to conduct pilot interviews in order to clarify the aims and the frame of the study before interviewing the primary subjects (Weiss 1994:15). We utilized the qualitative case study approach, in which our data relied on interview narratives from each of the twenty officers (Strauss 1987). The setting for this case study will be discussed in the next section.

⁴ Out of the three, Boone County is the most rural with 87% of its residents living in a rural section of the county, followed by Roane County with 78%, and Wood County with 27% (United States Census 2010).

Setting: A Small Rural Sheriff's Department in West Virginia

This study investigates rural police officers' beliefs about gun control using a sample from a rural sheriff's department in West Virginia. It explains how rural ideology, identity and culture influence their views. We present data from semi-structured interviews with twenty rural police officers, conducted as part of the sheriff's departments' ride-along program. The interviews focus on police officers' personal views on gun control, demographic backgrounds, and life histories. We chose this particular sheriff's department to draw a sample for this case study for multiple reasons. First, the sheriff's department handles the concealed carry permits for the county making them especially sensitive and knowledgeable about citizens having guns. Second, sheriffs are politically appointed, allowing for some examination of the role that politics play in the views of these police officers. Third, sheriffs serve all three components of the criminal justice system (law enforcement, courts, and corrections), making them more informed than those who have a more specialized job.

West Virginia is a small rural Appalachian state with a population of 1,854,304 of whom are 94% white (United States Census Bureau 2012). The state has a considerably low population density, in 2007; where there were only 75.1 persons per square mile (West Virginia Blue Book 2000). Of the 55 counties that make up the state, only 33 have access to public transportation (Rahall Transportation Institute 2013).

West Virginia's National Rifle Association reported having 32,000 members and has reportedly added 8,000 new members since the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary shooting (Porterfield 2013). In 2012, 92,000 people in West Virginia applied and obtained concealed carry permits (Brown 2013). In 2007, West Virginia had the 5th highest gun ownership rate (55.4%) among ten states that were considered to have extremely high gun ownership rates (White 2007).

The crime rate in West Virginia, for 2011 was 18% lower than the national average (United States Department of Justice 2011). In 2008, West Virginia had the highest rate of prescription drug overdose death in the United States and over 152,000 West Virginians are in need of drug treatment (Governor's Drug Free Workforce 2012). Nearly, 90% of the crimes in West Virginia are non-violent, with the most common crime being larceny-theft, which made up 60% of the offenses in the state in 2009 (Douglas 2012). Murder and non-negligent manslaughter accounted for the least frequent crimes in the state in 2009, with only 4.9 murders per 100,000 individuals (Douglas 2012).

The sheriff's department used in this study covers 365.89 square miles of territory (United States Census Bureau 2000). According to one officer Patrick, the sheriff's departments jurisdiction went from issuing around forty concealed carry permits a month to over three hundred a month, following the threat to strengthen gun control laws after the Sandy Hook shootings. The population for the department's jurisdiction is over 100,000 inhabitants and 91.2% of the population is white (US Census Bureau 2012). Six other police agencies are also in the area, including four different city police agencies, the state police and the police from a local university. Two thirds of the population resides in a remote rural section of the county (Kingery and Company 2011). The jurisdiction of the sheriff's department is considered to be rural by the United States Census Bureau (i.e., less than 1,000 persons per square mile), but the location of the department is considered a Metropolitan or Micropolitan Statistical Area. (i.e., 50,000 or more inhabitants (United States Census 2013). The sheriff's department in this county has approximately thirty police officers who work three different shifts: 7:00 am-3:00 pm, 3:00 pm-11:00 pm and 11:00 pm to 7:00 am. The sheriff's department is active twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Data Collection

We received West Virginia University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in order to conduct this research. As part of the initial recruitment process, we participated in the sheriff's department's ride-along program during all shifts. The ride-along program allows citizens to accompany police officers to observe and learn about the profession. From here, we used snowball sampling from officers we had previously interviewed. During the interview phase we dealt with all the demands of obtaining the data: such as recruiting the respondents, conducting the interviews, getting all the interviews transcribed, determining if the right information was being collected, and then conducting more interviews (Weiss 1994). Interviews were one-on-one, without interference from peers, and took place in interview rooms within the department or while on ride-alongs. We conducted interviews with twenty officers from this sheriff's department to explore their views on gun control and how rural identity influences them. Each interview lasted no longer than an hour, but we typically completed at least half of the shift with the officer, observing their habits and other aspects of the job. We told the officers about the general purpose of the study, made sure that it was ok to use a recorder, and let them know that their names would be changed and that no mention of the department name would be reported.⁵ As the research continued to develop, we developed data collection methods, took notes, and tape-recorded all of the interviews that we completed.

Participant Characteristics

Participants criteria for inclusion in the study were: 1) they had to identify as sworn law enforcement officials, and 2) they had to work at the Sheriff's department. This sample is representative of police officers from this sheriff's department, which has approximately thirty-

⁵ The officers' names were changed in order to protect their identities; the only identifier is that the department is located in West Virginia.

eight officers', we interviewed 52.6% of the officers at the department.⁶ In the following table we provide information about each of the twenty officers, including age, political affiliation, whether or not he or she was an NRA member, and the officers years in law enforcement.

Table 1: Police Officers in Sample

Pseudonym	Age	Political Affiliation	NRA Member	Years in Law Enforcement
Kent	56	Democrat	No	38
Patrick	53	Democrat	Yes	23
Roger	45	Democrat	Yes	25
Greg	49	Independent	No	21
Nathan	39	Republican	No	14
Vic	45	Democrat	No	13
Matthew	47	Independent	No	10 ½
Darryl	29	Democrat	No	8
Ted	48	Republican	No	8
Wyatt	30	Republican	No	8
Adam	30	None	No	7
Craig	28	Republican	No	6 ½
Gary	28	Republican	No	6
Judd	42	Republican	No	5 ½
Henry	28	Democrat	No	5
Megan	30	Independent/ Tea Party	No	
Fred	27	Republican	Yes	5
Jacob	24	Conservative	Yes	2
Brent	27	Independent	No	2
Lee	25	Republican	No	1

Most of the officers were from the county they police (N=12), six were from surrounding counties in West Virginia, and two were from another state nearby. Nineteen of the interviewees were male and one was female.⁷ All officers had some level of education beyond a high school degree (e.g., trade school certifications, or several years of college), and six had Bachelor's

⁶ Of the approximately thirty-eight sworn law enforcement officials at the department it is important to note that some of the officers were unavailable to be interviewed. For example, two deputies were in the police academy, two other deputies were on military leave. Three officers did not want to be interviewed or said they could not be interviewed and one officer never responded to requests for an interview.

⁷ There are only two female officers in the entire department.

degrees. Twelve participants were married, twelve had children and six had military experience. All but two participants were in full police uniform during the interview, the other two interviewees have different positions, which does not require a uniform. One was wearing a suit, dress shoes, his badge around his neck, and his gun on his hip, while the other wore blue jeans and a shirt.

Officers provided several reasons as to why they chose to become police officers. For instance, “certain vanity to the job, where one gets to be a hero, wrestle, run, fight, shoot and carry a gun and a badge.” Some stated that they have wanted to have this job since childhood, in order to fill a desire to help and protect people, and to feel like they were making a difference. Others had a family history of law enforcement, and some reported they wanted a job with low levels of monotony, and where different things happen every day.

Data Analysis

We taped audio from all twenty interviews and transcribed the data from each person verbatim, checking transcripts for accuracy using the recordings, and transcribing each interview prior to the next one as we continued the interview process. The analysis was performed in three different stages. First, we created codes, based on the interview guide, past literature, and the first interview. This step is known as open coding, or the initial type of coding, in order to present tentative concepts that seem to fit with the data (Strauss 1987:28). Second, we created preliminary themes based on codes from initial interviews. Third, we “cut and pasted” example quotes from each interview as they fell under each descriptive code. For this step we read through each transcribed interview in order to select quotes that illustrated each theme. Once overarching themes were established, we found that some quotes could fit multiple themes, so we reorganized our themes. Once we confirmed our themes, we began the writing process.

FINDINGS

From this study we had three major findings. The first major finding is that, in general, the police officers stated that they were against gun control, with almost all officers expressing strong pessimism about the effectiveness of gun control laws. The second major finding is that when officers were asked about more specific measures of gun control, they showed support. Finally, the third major finding is that officers expressed that guns are an essential part to rural upbringing.

For the first major finding officers were asked why they were against gun control as a general proposition, some police officers offered that they were skeptical of politics and view stricter gun control laws as the politicians' "feel-good attempt" to control something that will never be controlled. While, some also stated that there is nothing that will stop gun violence even if there was never another gun manufactured in this country. One officer at the police department said that there is no piece of legislation out there that's going to solve what people want it to solve [ending gun violence].

A second finding is that all officers who reported that they reject gun control in general, also reported a contradictory view, that they support specific gun control measures. For instance, all officers were strongly in favor of more stringent background checks. All said that gun control measures should expand background checks to include a person's mental health history, and they asserted that those who are mentally ill should not be permitted to purchase or carry a firearm. Most even went so far as to assert that anyone who purchases a gun should be required to complete a gun-safety training course. Similarly, the majority of police officers believed that citizens should have the right to obtain concealed carry permits. However, as above, this too was contradictory as most also complained that gun safety training classes, which are required for

concealed carry permits in West Virginia, are ineffective for the average citizen because they are administered in eight hours.

The third finding is that, officers believed that rural upbringing is an aspect of their personal histories that has strongly influenced their opinions on guns and gun control. Most officers reported that they grew up in places where one could shoot a gun in the backyard and where they were hunting at a young age, but they also emphasized that family members taught them how to responsibly use firearms. Related to this, some officers did not believe the fact that their employment at a rural sheriff's department influenced their views, since they were socialized into their views about guns at an earlier point in their lives, with most officers claiming to have strong opinions about gun control and guns before joining the force. Officers believe that rural policing translates into higher gun ownership than urban policing.

Below, we elaborate on each of these themes, using the officers' own words to describe their varying opinions on gun control. We utilized quotes from each of the twenty interviews. Notably, each of the officers reported that they had either been attacked, been on a call for service where a gun was involved, or had been threatened with a gun before while off duty or on duty. Next, in theme one we will discuss and present quotes about the officers pessimistic views on the effectiveness of gun control laws and how these officers hold symbolic views of guns.

Theme 1: Rejection of Gun Control Laws as Ineffective for Controlling Criminal Behavior and Symbolic Significance

Almost all officers rejected the idea and policy of increasing gun control. One reason for this is their pessimism about the effectiveness of proposed gun control laws. Some officers asserted increased gun control cannot work because the kinds of people who commit crimes are more likely to have networks who can obtain access to guns, regardless of the law. The main

reason was that they think criminals will always be able to get access to guns. Darryl, a twenty-nine-year-old officer, states that gun control measures will not be effective when dealing with criminals:

Criminals will always be able to get guns...The greater percentage of people [criminals] who I [have] contact [with] who have weapons do not buy them through a store. They bought them from someone on the street. They will always have access to them. You know, drugs have been illegal. People still get them every day, easier than guns. If someone wants a weapon, a gun, they will be able to get one.

Darryl went on to say that “if there is a will, then there is a way,” and that a person who really wants to hurt someone can do so without guns, including bricks, pool cues, bottles, and knives. Aside from his belief that gun control would be ineffective, Darryl took pride in the fact that guns have been a part of American culture and history “since the beginning” and stated that “pressing a button is not going to change that.” Ultimately he expressed that guns serve as symbolic identities for United States citizens and those who live and grow up in rustic cultures, where gun ownership is a cherished right.

Nathan, a thirty-nine-year-old middle ranking officer at the department, agreed with Darryl that increasing gun control laws is likely to be ineffective against criminals who will inevitably find the weapons they desire. However, Nathan also expressed worry that “honest hard-working” citizens will be adversely affected if they cannot protect themselves:

I think regardless of how well you try to limit who can and cannot have a firearm, there will always be a demand for that. Therefore, there will always be a way to get those items. If you limit who can have them as far as if you ban guns all together, then I think it’s just going to keep the honest, hard-working people from having them. It’s going to

make it easier for criminals to get them on the black market per se, and then the honest person won't be able to have them.

Nathan expresses his views that guns are a symbol of individuals being able to protect themselves and their families, and that if gun control laws went into effect they would not be able to do so. Nathan is relating with his rural gun owner identity, and believes that people should be able to obtain guns in order to express their individualistic goals.

The most cynical of all the officers interviewed was forty-five-year-old Roger, who happens to be one of the department's firearms instructors. In explaining his views, Roger cited the inescapability of criminal access to guns in his argument about why more gun legislation is not the answer to crime:

There's *nothing* that is going to stop the gun violence. If there were never another gun manufactured in this country, they're [guns] still going to be out there all over the place. You're not going to prevent it [gun violence], and you're not going to prevent people from finding them [guns] one way or another. I don't think there is a piece of legislation out there that's going to solve what people want it to solve.

Researchers have shown that police officers tend to hold cynical views. According to Joel Caplan (2003), "a cynic expects nothing but the worst in human behavior and it does not take long for police to become cynical." The fact that officers hold such cynical views surrounding the criminal population and the effectiveness of politicians' proposed gun laws leads to a pessimistic outlook, the view that nothing will work. However, cynicism to police officers is just seen as a natural tool that comes with the uniform but it can cloud the officers' judgment (Caplan 2003).

A few officers made the point that some United States cities with especially strict gun laws continue to have a high incidence of gun-related violence. Jacob, a twenty-four-year-old officer, pointed out that cities with both strict gun laws and high violence serve as evidence that stricter gun control is futile:

L.A. has some of the strictest gun laws. You can't have a magazine more than ten rounds. It doesn't matter... You still have gun violence every day in L.A.⁸ There are still gang members getting shot every single day, and they have the most strict gun laws.

Washington, D.C. and New York City [off-duty] police officers aren't even supposed to be carrying handguns in their city, and they still have gun violence.⁹ It's just not gonna help.

Jacob, along with other officers revealed exaggerated and negative views of cities. Some such as Gary, explained how in West Virginia gun violence is not as bad as Detroit or New York, but he did admit that “[gun violence] is a problem everywhere in the country” its just not a key problem in West Virginia. Another officer Ted, said that gun violence is becoming more prevalent in the area and that, “watching the news especially like Pittsburgh [news], every single day there is a shooting.”

Many officers openly questioned politicians' motives and agendas on the topic of gun control. Offering suggestions that politicians' are trying to take guns away from people who have a constitutional right to own these weapons, only because of recent high-profile cases of

⁸ “Generally, it is illegal to buy, manufacture, import, keep for sale, expose for sale, give or lend any large-capacity magazine (able to accept more than ten rounds) in California. However, continued possession of large-capacity magazines that you owned in California prior to January 1, 2000, is legal provided you are not otherwise prohibited. A person prohibited from possessing firearms is also prohibited from owning or possessing any magazines or ammunition (Harris 2014).”

⁹ The Law Enforcement Officers Safety Act (LEOSA) of 2004 allows officers to carry concealed off-duty not only in their jurisdictions but in all fifty states and territories in the United States, as long as certain qualifications are met (FBI 2011), and the National Association of Police Organization reports that New York City and D.C. can carry a weapon concealed off-duty but there are still restrictions about where one can carry in those locations (e.g., one cannot carry concealed in a federal building).

gun violence. In which, officers claim that a great deal of media attention on gun control laws placed political pressure on the politicians' to take action. However, Megan said, "We need to deal with the laws that we have in place. I think we have plenty of laws in place. We just don't utilize them, and you know, I think that should be put into the spotlight because of newer, more recent gun violence." While, some officers approve of current laws, and believe they just are not being enforced, others such as Wyatt, a thirty-year-old officer, articulated that gun laws are becoming too restrictive:

I actually think that it's getting too restrictive. Like I said, I feel that it's closing that gap closer to overstepping the Second Amendment. Because, you know, are you going to blame the Honda Civic because a drunk driver drove it and killed somebody? I mean, that's my personal view on this. It's not the guns that are killing people. It's the people that are carrying the guns. And even though you put restrictive laws on that person, the people that are doing this stuff, do they legally go obtain that gun? You know, I guess that would be the research I would want to see. [That] would be the school shootings and other things.¹⁰ It's not like they went through the process, or they were prohibited from carrying a gun. They got it on the black market or took it off somebody that is a good outstanding citizen gun owner. So I think that it falls back on the responsibility of the person that owns a gun to make sure that it's secured and kept out of the hands of people who don't need to have one.

¹⁰ Adam Lanza the gunman at Newtown, CT did not have a background check run, he used guns registered to his mother, James Holmes the gunman responsible for the shooting in Aurora, CO purchased his guns legally and had a background check run, Jared Loughner the gunman who shot Rep. Gabrielle Giffords and nineteen other people had a background check done, was not flagged, and finally Seung-Hui Cho who killed thirty-two people at Virginia Tech was deemed mentally ill by a judge in Virginia, which would have disqualified him from obtaining firearms, but somehow slipped through the system, only one of those shootings could have been prevented with a proper background check (Johns 2013).

A handful of officers said that they are ok with gun control laws as long as they do not infringe on a person's Second Amendment right, the right to bear arms. A couple of officers even went so far to say that the government doesn't want anybody to have guns and that was their aim when proposing new gun legislation. Most officers agreed that no matter what gun control legislation was proposed there would always be a demand for guns, and criminals would always have a way to get them. Again, expressing a cynical view of criminals and the effectiveness of proposed gun legislation. However, the officers did not express cynicism toward the law-abiding citizen, and their rights claiming that gun owners have the ultimate responsibility to keep guns out of the hands of others.

Officers specifically express pessimistic views about reinstating a ban on assault rifles, a proposed piece of legislation by politicians. Many stated that banning assault rifles would have no effect on gun violence, although admittedly many were biased because of their own personal ownership of assault-type rifles. For instance, Roger claimed that the term "assault" is merely a media term for a rifle that he claims has been around for sixty years, and that is all of the sudden bad.¹¹ Similarly, Vic, a forty-five-year-old officer, with the department said this about a potential ban on assault rifles:

I know it keeps sounding like I keep saying the same thing. But, bad things are still going to happen whether there is or isn't a ban. Bans only affect people that pay attention and follow the law. Convicts are still going to have assault rifles and don't care. I know [and] you've probably heard this a thousand times already, really why would you penalize a

¹¹ The term 'assault weapon' is a misleading and politically loaded term that is widely used and has been used since the 1980's, gun control advocates have successfully convinced mainstream media to use as a blanket term, the term 'assault rifle' has been used to describe semi-automatic rifles (i.e., a weapon that automatically reloads after each bullet is fired) (Blake 2013). 'Assault rifle' accurately describes guns that are designed for offensive assaults on large numbers of human beings that are not useful or necessary for legitimate sport or self-defense," said Jon Lowy, director of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence's Legal Action Project.

law-abiding citizen whenever convicts are running loose with whatever arms they can gather.

The reoccurring view is that stricter gun control laws will hurt law-abiding citizens and that criminals will always be able to obtain these items, no matter what laws are in place. As gun owners themselves, officers do not want to be penalized, nor do they think its fair for law-abiding citizen to pay for the mistakes of a few. In this sense, the officers are identifying as rural gun owners, who have rifles themselves and do not want them taken away.

But Gary, a twenty-eight-year-old, officer who was in the military for a number of years, disagreed and argued saying that civilians have no business owning assault-type rifles:

[There is] no reason that you need to own one of those [assault rifles] as a civilian whatsoever. I understand people want to hunt, and if you want to have your bull tags and rifle and go out and shoot some deer, I get that.¹² This is rural America; *everybody* was brought up on right to bear arms, whatever. But, there is absolutely no reason that people should be able to go out and purchase AK-47's and M-4's and stuff like that. That's stuff that civilians just have no need for whatsoever.¹³

Gary went on to say that, military and law enforcement are the only people who should have access to assault-type weapons, the only reason a civilian would need a high-powered weapon is if "you're planning on knocking off a 7-11." He went on to confess, "I'm probably jaded [biased] more toward stricter regulations, just because I've had idiots that have no idea what they are

¹² Bull-tags are actually called 'game field tags' in West Virginia, which refer to the tags hunters use when they kill an animal to tag it and then take it to the game checking station to get it checked in, to make sure it was a legal kill (West Virginia Division of Natural Resources 2014).

¹³ An AK-47 is a soviet-designed gas operated magazine fed rifle for automatic or semi-automatic fire, called Russian avtomat Kalashnikova (named after its inventor and 47 stands for the year it was invented) (Merriam-Webster 2014). The U.S. Defense Department replaced the M4 carbine assault rifle, adopted by the U.S. Army in the mid-1990s; the M4 assault rifle is a modern version of the M16, which U.S. soldiers have been using in battle since the Vietnam War (Baglole 2014).

doing with a firearm, pull them out on calls, and just do stupid stuff.” Gary recognizes that police socialization of guns affected his views, increasing his cynicism towards the average citizen owning high-powered large caliber weapons.

Kent, a fifty-six-year-old high ranking officer at the department, asserted that it is noncriminal citizens who attend gun-safety training classes, apply for a concealed-carry permit, and undergo a proper background check. However, he also said that he believes it is hypocritical for police, who are gun-users by definition, to express support for gun control:

We issue their guns to them [deputies], so we can't say we're *for* gun control. We're giving you guns to do your job and I think by virtue of the job that our folks do...Everybody's armed because the job that they do is dangerous, and it may at some point require you to use that firearm in defense of yourself or somebody else. And along with that, we make sure that they [deputies] are trained in and understand how that weapon works to the point of not just pointing it and shooting it and hitting your target or hitting what your aiming at, but to tear it [the gun] down, take it apart, [and] put it back together again to understand exactly how it works inside and out. But yeah, just by virtue of what we do, I don't know how you can say we issue guns to people, and then say we should have gun control.

Kent believes, that because police work requires officers to carry and operate guns, it is not only logical, but also disingenuous for them to oppose it. From what can be seen from these interviews while officers are concerned about criminals getting guns, they know there is no solution in sight for this issue. No one brought up a specific concern about any other gun owners.

Overall police are pessimistic of and about the possibility that lawbreakers can be prevented from getting guns and assert that law-abiding citizens will feel the effect of stricter

gun control laws. This overall pessimism could be attributed to the nature of the job, and officers' personal gun ownership, which influences their anti-gun control sentiments. In the next theme, we found that when officers were asked about more specific gun control measures, they supported things such as expanding background checks, overall expressing more nuanced and different views, compared to theme one where they showed overall pessimism about the effectiveness of gun control laws.

Theme 2: Support for Specific Gun Control Measures

Although police officers in this study universally identified as being anti-gun control, almost all expressed support for some specific gun control measures. For instance, all police viewed stricter background checks as an important step towards increasing safety of citizens and police.¹⁴ Wyatt, a thirty-year-old officer, argued for a need for stricter background checks, even though he thinks those who comply with the law tend to be law-abiding citizens:

I agree with that [background checks]. Even though, I would say a responsible citizen is going to go through the extra hoops if they want to carry a firearm. If it takes me an extra week [to buy my own gun] because they have to do this, it would make me feel better about waiting because I have nothing to hide. I have no reason why, other than [that] I have to wait an extra week. I like that idea because even though it's not going to end everything [crime], it just makes it a little bit harder, and even if it keeps one or two firearms out of the hands of somebody that doesn't deserve them, it's a start.

Though the officers we interviewed stated that they hope that stricter background checks will prevent felons, domestic violence offenders, and those whom one interviewee called

¹⁴ Senator Joe Manchin, a Democrat from West Virginia, proposed a gun law change that, if passed, would have expanded background checks to guns purchased online and at gun shows.

“foreigners” from purchasing firearms, they were most concerned about the population of the mentally ill.¹⁵ Currently, the federal background check form has a self-report item that asks potential gun buyers, “Have you ever been adjudicated mentally defective (which includes a determination by a court, board, commission, or other lawful authority that you are a danger to yourself or to others or are incompetent to manage your own affairs) or have you ever been committed to a mental institution?” (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives 2012). The officers stated that even though the form features a mental illness screening question, a mentally ill person can check “no” on the form and purchase such a large caliber automatic weapon.¹⁶

Many officers cite their own histories as gun owners and their experiences going through the background check themselves, and how this opened their eyes to flaws in the federal system. Darryl, an officer, believes that mental health is the major weakness in the current federal system, asserting that criminals will still be able to get firearms, but gun violence could be greatly reduced by keeping guns away from the mentally ill:

My concern is mental health. I’ve bought several guns, and it asks you a question “Have you ever been ruled mentally incompetent?” on the background sheet form. Well, all you have to do is circle “no,” and I wish there was a way to control that. Unfortunately, I’ve seen a lot of suicides. Maybe some of those could not have happened....Obviously, you

¹⁵ The definition of a prohibited person under the current laws are as follows: “those convicted of a misdemeanor crime of domestic violence, convicted of a felony, or any other crime punishable by imprisonment for a term exceeding one year, a fugitive from justice, an unlawful user of or addicted to marijuana or any depressant, stimulant, or narcotic drug or any controlled substance, has been adjudicated mentally defective or has been committed to a mental institution, dishonorably discharged from the Armed Forces, has renounced his or her U.S. citizenship, is an illegal alien in the U.S. or is subject to certain restraining orders (ATF 2012).”

¹⁶ Only a small fraction of people with mental illness meet the federal standards for inclusion in the gun database, which encompasses a court ruling of insanity and a person with a record of being involuntarily admitted to a mental hospital (Los Angeles Times 2013).

look at your mass shootings, and a lot of those involve mental health issues. That, I think, should be the main focus of gun control. You're not going to keep them out of the hands of criminals, ever. But if you could do something to keep them out of the hands of someone who should not have one based on mental health. Then, I think you'll probably be taking some steps in the right direction, and I do support that. Absolutely.

Surprisingly, although officers tend to hold rural values, such as the importance of privacy and a distrust of "big government," they drew a line when it came to the privacy rights of those with mental illness. One officer, Henry, a twenty-eight-year-old deputy, went so far as to argue that the first step in expanding background checks should be loosening HIPPA laws.¹⁷ In his eyes, if lawmakers reduced HIPPA protections, background checks could then encompass even minor and common mental health issues, such as panic attacks and depression.¹⁸

Another officer twenty-seven-year-old Fred, also agreed that new gun legislation should mainly focus on background checks that will keep weapons out of the hands of people who are mentally ill:

There's many things that could change about it [gun control]. I mean, the biggest thing I think that goes wrong is maybe the background checks and such. A lot of these things where they're finding these movie theater shooters and stuff like that. They find, "Oh wait, they *did* have a long history of mental illness and things like that." But, they still made it through the background checks. That would be where I think it goes wrong, is

¹⁷ HIPPA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996) protects the privacy of individually identifiable health information.

¹⁸ In the United States, alone, about one in four adults suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder each year (National Institute of Mental Health 2014). In 2009, forty percent of adults with serious mental illnesses in the United States did not receive any treatment (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2010).

checking people's mental stability.

Paradoxically, even though almost all deputies agreed with increasing background checks, some were critical of politicians who openly support this gun control measure. Judd, a forty-two-year-old Republican, said that while he supports expanding background checks, he thinks West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin is a "puppet" who's "useless, just like Obama. He's a follower, not a leader." Nevertheless, Judd continued to verbalize his support of citizens obtaining concealed carry permits, for which a background check is required:¹⁹

I'm all about concealed carry. I'm a firm believer of concealed carry. I think that if there were more [people with] concealed carry [permits then] there would be less crime. Some of these big cities that are banning guns altogether? I mean, look at the crime rate. Look at the crime rate of Chicago. I mean it's what? An average of two to three murders per day in Chicago? So, yeah. I think that the criminals know, "Hey, I'm going to go up here and mug grandma, or I'm going to rape this chick over here." They would probably think twice if they thought "Oh, this person might have a gun." I blame it all on the President.

Nearly all deputies stated a belief that citizens should be able to hold concealed carry permits, justifying this claim by stating that localities where guns are more controlled, such as large cities, have more gun-related violence.²⁰ While the officers, in general supported concealed carry permits, some took this right to the extreme in stating that they thought everyone should be able to obtain them.

¹⁹ According to the Government Accountability Office (2014), "States concealed carry laws can allow handgun owners, under certain conditions, to carry a loaded handgun either concealed on a person, in a vehicle or in public. 'Concealed carry' means a person may carry a handgun in a manner so that others cannot see the handgun. This generally applies to handguns (i.e. pistols and revolvers), however some states concealed carry laws can also regulate the carrying of other weapons (i.e. knives)."

²⁰ In 2012 Chicago had more than 500 gun-related homicides (Davey 2013).

Matthew, a forty-seven-year-old officer, who identifies as pro-gun, is retired from the military after twenty-three years of service and a strong supporter of concealed carry, but is very critical of the training required for the average citizen to get such a permit:

I think that everyone has the right to have a concealed carry [permit]. You know, to protect themselves and to protect others. However, I think the requirements to get a concealed carry need to be stricter. And what I mean by that is about three years ago I attended, I'm not going to tell you where, but I attended a firearms training seminar, a forty-hour firearms training class, and one man [taught] probably like fifteen people, and what I witnessed was just absolutely absurd. I kept thinking they're gonna put firearms in these people's hands, and they're gonna be able to carry them...Basically, there were several people in the class that had never handled a firearm...and he put like six people on [a] line and said "This is what I want you to do. I only want you to fire one shot, and I don't want you to use the hammer."²¹ I want you to use the trigger to get the hammer to come back." And I observed a woman, probably fifty years old, pull the hammer back, and then turn around with the gun in her hand. I mean, she had no clue what she was doing, and I think that it needs to more one-on-one...I think that they need to be able to filter out who has experience with firearms, and I think, that person needs a more one-on-one course with firearms for safety reasons. They may tell you that they need to be familiar with your firearm, and to be honest, I don't think I could have seen that woman carrying a concealed weapon. I just think that their [first-time gun handlers] training needs to be stricter because it's too easy for anybody to get them [concealed carry permits], and there has been a significant jump in concealed carry permits in this county

²¹ The hammer is part of the firing mechanism of the gun (Chastain 2014).

only because we have had to hire a part-time girl to help with all the concealed carries that are coming in throughout the day, and it was not like that six years ago.

Thus, most officers claimed they were anti-gun control, but upon asking them questions related to specific gun control measures, we were able to find that they actually support aspects of new gun control legislation. One such example is, even though officers believe civilians should have the right carry a weapon concealed; they stress the need for more extensive gun-safety training courses. Matthew also claims that there has been a spike in concealed carry permits in the county, and while he agrees with concealed carry permits and civilians being required to take gun-safety training classes, he says that those who have been in the military and law enforcement should not be required to take a gun safety class to purchase a firearm.

Civilians take an eight-hour course, to qualify to carry a weapon concealed in public in West Virginia but the police academy requires officers to take at least four months of firearms training. According to Kent, 75% of the bullets they shoot in those at the range must hit a target. If officers fail, they have to retake the whole course. Several officers referenced their experiences when discussing concerns about gun safety training classes in West Virginia. For instance, Gary an officer, worried that civilians after only a few hours of training can carry the same weapon as military and law enforcement officers who have months of training:

It's like a one-day course right now where you basically just show up [and] do some basic familiarization stuff, like don't point your gun sideways when you're loading it 'cause if you're on a firing line, there are people standing next to you, and if you accidentally pull the trigger, you could shoot them. And they make sure you understand the basic mechanics of it, but they don't touch on marksmanship. And every firearm is different mechanically. They don't go over cleaning the weapon properly, and how to

clean it safely, and just the basic mindset behind using a firearm. Like, the military and law enforcement? They have like four months of boot camp or academy where that gets drilled into you every day, and you still have people screwing it up at the end. Civilians go out and take an eight-hour course, and they're expected to be able to maintain [a gun] safely. You've got guys that have been training for four months, and they're still making stupid mistakes with a firearm. I don't think people should be able to go to an eight-hour course and carry the same firearm.

It seemed that the officers with military backgrounds are the most critical of the eight-hour gun safety training courses for citizens. They present an almost biased view, because of their own extensive gun training.

Another officer, Judd, spent over twenty years as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), twenty-five years as a volunteer firefighter, and two and a half years in special operations for the military during Desert Storm. He gave an account of one of his recent calls for service during which a victim had been through a gun-safety class, had a concealed carry permit, but still managed to shoot himself in the foot:

A kid who has a concealed carry permit, who's been through a gun-safety class had a .380 firearm, was cleaning it--him and his buddy cleaning it--put it back together, puts a fully loaded magazine in it, chambers a round, and then says literally, "I didn't want to chamber a round," so he racks the firearm back, a bullet ejects. Anybody that knows anything about guns and has been through a gun-safety class knows that with a magazine in, another round is going to re-chamber [in the gun]. He completely lost his mind and forgot that it chambered a round. Needless to say, he shot his self.

This example supports the officers' argument that gun-safety training classes are ineffective to the average citizen. Megan, one of only two female officers in the sheriff's department, revealed that she was uncomfortable around firearms before becoming a police officer because, around the age of ten, a neighbor pulled a gun on her and another child. She said this incident made her fearful of firearms from an early age:

I think everyone needs to take a safety-training course. I just don't know how well they would be able to make sure everybody did that, and *actually* did it, and not just forge [the paperwork] or have somebody they know that owns a firearm place do it for them. I think everybody should, because I was uncomfortable with guns until I became a police officer, and then the more you work with them, the more comfortable you are and the better you are with them. So I think everybody should have to go through them. Just like hunters have to take hunters' safety. Why not have to take a gun safety class?

Even though Megan is concerned about compliance and enforcement, she thinks that it is inconsistent to require hunters to take a safety class in order to get a hunting license, but not to require a gun-safety class to purchase a gun. Gun safety training classes in West Virginia are only required to carry a weapon concealed. But, no coursework or knowledge is required to purchase a firearm. Ted, a forty-eight-year-old officer, agrees that all citizens', not just gun owners, need to know how to operate a firearm and should take a gun-safety class:

Yes. I do think that is a good idea. They need to know, one, how to operate that thing. You hear a lot of people that will tell you, "Oh, I'd shoot this person if they did this." Really, you'd be surprised. You pull a gun, you have to be prepared. At that moment I'm going to kill this person, period. And if you're not able to do that, then you're going to die 'cause they're going to take [the gun] off you. So I feel that everybody should be

trained.

Most officers stated that all individuals should be trained to operate a gun, whether they own guns or not. Thus, while many officers consider rural people to be responsible and safe gun owners, they also make an argument that *all* people should take training classes. Also notable is that the officers both view rural people as responsible gun owners, like themselves, but also as unsafe and untrained with firearms. However, many of them also doubt that the government can mandate someone to take a gun safety training classes.

The fact that these officers hold such contradictory views on gun control measures is surprising considering they not only live but also work in a rural environment, where being pro-gun is a way of life. An explanation for this could be the relational identity theory, as defined by Hecht (1993), people define themselves in terms of others, people define themselves in terms of their relationships and relationships then take on an identity. Therefore, it could be that these officers are experiencing conflicting identities, between their identity as police officers who witnesses gun violence first-hand and rural gun owners, who do not want their guns taken away from them, maintaining a pro-gun identity obtained from the officers rural upbringing is seen as remaining true to their rural identity and culture. However, if a pro-gun control identity from gun socialization on the job is expressed that would be seen as going against the officers rural upbringing. Thus, there is a disconnect between what the officers really believe and how they identify.

Overall, despite the fact that officers earlier identified as anti-gun control in a general sense (see Theme 1), theme two shows that the officers' views on gun control evolved and diverged from the views they were raised with and still claim to identify with. They expressed support for specific gun control measures, such as expanding background checks, more intensive

training classes, requiring all citizens to be trained in gun safety, and a support for citizens to obtain concealed carry permits. However, they also deemed gun-safety classes in their current format to be ineffective for training the average citizen, and believed that while expanding background checks might keep mentally ill individuals from obtaining firearms, criminals would still be able to get guns no matter what legislation was passed. Therefore, their views have come to be more practical in nature because of their on the job socialization, but they still express a symbolic anti-gun control identity. Given that so many officers cited rural upbringing as crucial for their life and work, in theme three we examine how guns are essential to rural upbringing and identity.

Theme 3: Guns as Essential to Rural Upbringing and Identity

In general, children from rural areas are socialized from a young age to be comfortable, if not enthusiastic, around guns (Raasch 2013). This may be because family members hunt for food or sport, target shoot in wide open spaces for recreation, or they just feel the practical need to own guns for protection from animals and other threats that occur in isolated places. So entrenched in gun culture were the officers we interviewed that a few were surprised by questions asking them about their exposure to guns as children, teens, and young adults. Several officers noted that “this is West Virginia” and therefore “everyone” has guns, and one officer stated that “a lot of the contacts I make, 90% of them have guns somewhere if it’s not on them it’s in a gun cabinet or a case. That’s always on our mind” [as rural police officers], and “if you don’t [have guns] then you’re not from West Virginia.” Many officers explained that over time on the job they have become less interested in guns and gun-related recreation compared to others in their community. Still, rural culture in general, and the subculture of gun sports and recreation in particular, has influenced their pro-gun symbolic identity, even as their practical

views about gun control have evolved and come more in line with those of urban officers who support expanded background checks and other gun control measures.

Most officers stated that socialization into gun culture and gun-safety from a very young age is an essential part of “proper” rural upbringing. Officers stated that familiarity, firsthand knowledge, and respect for guns is essential to being an upstanding rural father and grandfather, and guns hold a great deal of sentimental value in rural places. Patrick, an officer explained he owns multiple guns that family members passed down to him: “I have a sawed-off shotgun that was passed down to me from my father, and I have a 33 and I have a 357 magnum that I got after my dad passed away.” Another officer said that he only had guns outside of department-issued ones because they were given to them as gifts, and he has never even shot the guns, but because they were given to him, they have a sentimental value.

Having been raised around guns, rural citizens are often desensitized to their potential violent effects outside of hunting and recreational purposes. Henry, a twenty-eight-year-old officer, is responsible for patrolling “the western end” of the county, which is composed of 150 square miles that he considers to be the most rural section under the sheriff’s department’s supervision. He is very familiar with the community he patrols, a place where residents distrust outsiders and the police. He stated that it was only after one or two years on the force that community members accepted him, even though he was actually born and raised there. In this part of the county, cell phone service is often unreliable and officer backup may take anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour. Henry went on to explain that even though he grew up with guns in his home, they were his grandfather’s and were just a keepsake; they were never used, and his family did not keep “ammo” in the house. However, around the age of ten, his father decided to let him shoot one of the guns. Though his father taught him how to be safe with the

firearm, Henry emphasized that his father's goal was not to teach self-defense, but taught him to respect firearms and learn how to properly use them. This includes loading and unloading guns properly and understanding how they work-essentially what to do and what not to do. He went on to explain his own gun ownership by comparing himself to the people who have surrounded him for his entire life in a rural place:

Let's start with now, and work back just a little bit. Again, I don't hunt anymore, [and] when I did hunt it wasn't avid. Every gun I have has a purpose. It's really minimalistic gun ownership for the most part. It's [guns] all a tool to me. When I was younger and shooting [it] was a lot more fun to me back then for some reason. The rural upbringing played into it because that's just what little hillbilly kids did. They shot their 22s. They shot their daddy's shotgun. They filled pop bottles up with water and shot them and watched them explode and stuff. That's what we did because we had space to do it in a rural setting. Obviously, there is space to do stuff like that.

To Henry, his gun ownership is very "minimalistic" when compared to other gun owners in a rural environment. However, urban residents would probably consider him a gun enthusiast, which Kohn (2004) describes as a person who has an interest in owning and using guns who, legally owns at least one gun, takes pleasure in talking about guns and shooting guns with other gun aficionados. Most officers would be considered gun enthusiasts by such a definition.

Henry also referred to the space in rural areas (e.g., wooded areas and fields) for people to fire guns in their own backyards.²² Eleven of the twenty officers interviewed said that they hunt, used to hunt or grew up around someone that did hunt.²³ West Virginia's gun culture is so pervasive that even its large land-grant university shares this culture, such that the West Virginia

²² West Virginia alone has over 1.6 million acres of public land (West Virginia Division of Natural Resources 2014).

²³ According to the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (2014) over 350,000 people hunt each year.

University Mountaineer mascot carries a rifle to all events, and the university holds the national championship rifle team. West Virginia is also the fifth highest (55.4%), and only four states (e.g., Wyoming, Alaska, Montana and South Dakota) surpass West Virginia (White 2014). States with large metropolitan areas such as Chicago in Illinois and New York City in New York had below median populations of gun owners 20% and 18% respectively, even though they have higher rates of gun-related violence.

Another officer, Matthew thinks that growing up in a rural area and knowing that a lot of citizens are armed influence officers in rural places. He said he understands why large city officials would push for stricter gun laws, even with lower gun ownership as they have the criminal element of society using guns for violent purposes:

I think it goes back to growing up around guns and you know most of the citizens of this county are deer hunters and it's not uncommon for a household to have a firearm.

Whereas, if your living in the big city of Pittsburgh, the probability of you having a firearm in your residence is probably slim. And I could see where Pittsburgh you know, want stricter gun laws. But, you have your hunters here. So, I think they're [my views] are greatly changed because of those reasons. There's more people likely to have firearms in a rural area or setting than a city.

Being exposed to hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities is a way of life in West Virginia. Some officers explained that assimilation to guns from a young age is "proper" rural upbringing. Lee, a twenty-five-year-old officer, claimed that he was raised "properly" and went on to say that those who have never been around guns were raised in a vastly different way and therefore views guns as a more of a safety issue:

My views are shaped because that's how I was raised. I was raised around guns. I was

familiar with guns. I was trained on guns, so I don't see them as that big of an issue as somebody who has no contact with a weapon. I could see how they are intimidating for people that don't have weapons or have never used a weapon. I think my upbringing had a really big effect on it, 'cause I was raised properly. Taught how to shoot them and how to take them apart and I'm real familiar with them, and I think that and the military. I feel more comfortable with them, and it has shaped my views.

Officers have a belief in what constitutes a proper rural upbringing. Specifically, involving men teaching children how to be safe with guns and believe that a boy is only raised "properly" if he has been introduced to guns. Otherwise, it seems that they think an individual is raised "improperly" and will have no knowledge of guns, be afraid of guns, and probably hold stronger views in support of stricter gun control laws. These people the officers are referring to will most likely also not be trained on gun safety, and be similar to those people they meet in the line of duty, who shoot themselves accidentally or commit suicide. Vic, a forty-five-year-old officer talked about his childhood growing up in a rural county where neighbors relied on venison that they hunted as their main winter meat source:

I grew up in a rural county, so everyone hunted. I've been around guns since I was a kid. I remember going to shooting matches with my dad when I was six years old, so guns are something that I'm familiar with and used to. There were always guns in our house. I use them for hunting. I have been around guns all my life, and we weren't "hoity" people. They [guns] were for procurement of food, and just everyone had rifles, mostly, no one had handguns.

Even though rifles are the most common guns in rural areas, there are plenty of residents who utilize handguns for protection. While many rural gun owners are hunters who use rifles or

shotguns, the percentage of citizens owning handguns is higher in rural areas than in cities (23% versus 15%) (Weisheit 1994).

Almost all officers strongly asserted that exposure to guns at a young age is an important part of rural upbringing and contributed to their pro-gun identity. Two major arguments about the benefit of exposure can be made from these interviews. First, those who are exposed to guns in a rural environment learn about guns in a holistic way, and that guns are not just used for violence and revenge; thus, not being introduced to guns in a way that teaches kids that guns are scary. Rural people tend to have meaningful and sentimental exposure and interaction with guns at a young age. One officer even mocked people who have a limited knowledge of guns, either limited to television or exposure to individuals on the street, and said that “those who see the violence on TV might have different opinions” on guns than someone who grew up around them in a rural area.

Thus, in contrast to the idealized view of rural places where competent, non-dangerous and law-abiding gun owners reside, officers described cities as crime-ridden places where urban residents are misinformed about guns, are ignorant about gun safety and laws, and have more of a criminal population which leads to dangerous gun incidents with children and overzealous ignorance-based views about gun control. Greg, a forty-nine-year-old officer, talked about his early childhood and being raised around guns and said that his views would be unlike someone whom is taught that guns are dangerous:

Probably, [rural upbringing] has a lot to do with it. Like I said, I grew up around them. I remember probably being three years old, four years old, sitting on the floor with my dad as he was cleaning guns, and he would show me how to tear them apart, how to make sure they were safe, you know. When you hear about the seven year old who shoots his

friend and things like that, those are the kids that are, “Don’t ever touch that, no matter what.” You know? And kids are going to do it in spite, but [what] if they were properly trained? I’m talking about their parents. If they’re going to have those type of weapons in their house, god forbid a kid ever got a hold of it, at least it would be nice to know if they did they would be trained to make sure they are unloaded, and that kind of thing.

Greg hypothesizes that children who are raised well, which means to and know about guns then there will be less incident of gun violence. Matthew, another officer, claims that urban parents are not gun owners and thus, are unable to teach children about how to responsibly use guns:

I mean, if you grew up around firearms and firearm safety, which every common father-- I’m not going say “good” but common father’s going [to] teach their son or daughter gun safety. They don’t want them blowing their foot off or their arm off or their hand off. So if that’s not going on in the city because they just don’t have guns...Where[as] I think rural people are more responsible, and that’s probably going to bite me in the ass later, because I know there are a few cases [of rural people handling guns irresponsibly]. But I think that your crime rate in the country, the rural areas, is less than what is in the populated city areas.²⁴

The officers had a conviction that the fundamentals of using a firearm are more often taught to rural children with responsible parents in order to try to prevent accidents from happening, such as an accidental shooting. Gun knowledge and responsibility can also be seen as a sense of rural pride and identity. It is assumed that urban families do not have the knowledge to teach to use a

²⁴ Firearm crime rates are higher for residents of cities of 250,000 or more (Firearm and Injury Center at Penn 2011).

gun properly.²⁵ Again, Matthew held an idealized view of rural people as responsible gun owners, even though he admitted he sees exceptions on the job. Further he seems to attribute injuries with firearms among children with high rates of crime violence.²⁶

Similar to Matthew, Craig, a twenty-eight-year-old officer, believes his views have been greatly influenced by growing up in a rural area where he has been around all types of guns from the age of six or seven and says those growing up in a city have insufficient exposure to guns:

I was raised in the country where me and my four brothers and my dad, we hunted. We grew up with pellet guns and BB [guns]. We target practiced. It's probably different; my view would be, than some kid who is growing up in the South Side of Chicago right now where ten people are being killed every day. So I would say it was greatly influenced by where I was raised.

Several officers agreed that if they had grown up in a suburban or urban area their views on guns and gun control might be different. For example, Adam, a thirty-year-old officer, revealed that while he was not a hunter anymore, he strongly believes that it is hard to understand a passion for gun ownership if one has not been raised around them. He also said that urban people are ignorant of reasons for owning guns and do not understand what the Second Amendment right is:

I grew up in a rural upbringing, so I've been around firearms a lot more as far as hunting rifles go, a lot more than maybe somebody that grew up in a big city where they don't hunt. I've went hunting before. It's just not something that I'm into, but it's not that I disagree with that, but I would say as far as it reflecting my views, I guess I feel more comfortable being around firearms and am more pro-firearms than somebody who hasn't

²⁵ In 2010 West Virginia reported ten unintentional firearm-related fatalities and Texas had the highest number at fifty-four deaths, and gun related accidents have been on a decline over the last two decades and has dropped by fifty-eight percent (National Shooting Sports Foundation 2013).

²⁶ According to the *New York Daily News*, in 2009 guns were responsible for the hospitalization of nearly 7,000 children in the United States.

been around them and doesn't understand that they can be used as a sport, and they may not understand what the Second Amendment is. So I would say it makes me more comfortable because I have been around them.

Officers, as gun owners themselves, support the Second Amendment right to bear arms, but because of their jobs they also know people use guns in the “wrong way”, in order to commit crimes. Darryl, a twenty-nine-year-old officer, explained that his childhood socialization guns incorporated an idealized view of a respectable rural upbringing that is superior to the way urban children are socialized, where views are heavily influenced by media accounts of gun violence. Darryl, described his “safe” introduction to guns in comparison to an urban child on the street:

I was introduced to them [guns] in a controlled, safe manner, in which I was taught to respect them [and] their safety. I think [I have] a positive view on them because of that reason. If you're thirteen years old and some kid hands you one in school or in the street, then you are obviously not going to have that same outlook, and you're going to wonder “What's the deal?”

Parents in rural areas exposed their sons to guns on a regular basis and then police are in contact with them as part of their jobs. However, exposure to guns while on the job separates rural officers from other rural people because of the dangerous context where they could be threatened with a firearm, pull someone over who has a concealed weapon or get a call for service in which a perpetrator is brandishing a firearm. Almost all officers described such incidents that occurred while they were on duty and presented many different scenarios in which they were threatened with firearms or they received a call where a firearm was involved, and a few officers admitted they had been involved in hunting accidents and other off-duty gun accidents. This exposure to the dangerous side of firearms has impacted the pro-gun views that

they have held for all their lives. Many officers disclosed that they now carry handguns when off-duty for personal protection reasons, though they are not required to do so. Kent, an officer who has been in law enforcement for thirty-eight years, believes that police views on gun control laws evolve over the course of their job. He reported that he is not as enthusiastic about guns as he used to be, and said that working for the department has caused him to develop a more conservative view about populations that should be prohibited from owning guns. He stated that he learned a respect for firearms from his rural upbringing and acknowledged that West Virginia's gun culture has and continues to influence his views, but insisted that his position as a high ranking official at the department has changed his stance, such that he views guns themselves can be lethal weapons that are used against human beings and therefore require control:

Maybe the fact that I've grown up around weapons of one type or another most of my life, *I've* learned a respect for weapons that maybe somebody that hasn't [grown up around weapons] doesn't have [a respect for weapons], because I know what they can do. I've seen what they can do. I think that probably does have some degree [of] influence because I'm thinking in my mind, "I know how this particular weapon works or this one or this one. I know the damage that this weapon can do and this one and this one." So I respect that stuff and where somebody says, "Well, you know, nobody gets killed by an empty weapon." That's true. You make sure it's unloaded, and I do those things all the time, even at home. So probably, to some degree, without really thinking about it before until just now, I would say that [rural upbringing] probably does have some influence on it, because I'm thinking, "Why would you have to take a weapon away from somebody that is well-versed in how it's to be used in the proper ways?" But on the flip side of that,

being involved in law enforcement [for] so long, I know that a lot of times weapons *aren't* used for what they are supposed to be used for. They're used as a destructive device against other human beings.

Rural individualism and gun culture were embedded in most officers' childhoods, but given the dangerous nature of their jobs, it is not surprising that they now have more nuanced views about gun control. As for Vic, who was familiar with guns from a young age, he said that "Once you get into this line of work, I guess when you see some goofiness, you will also gather up a shotgun for some protection" rather than just using it for hunting. During the course of interviews officers seemed to come to a realization that dangerous aspects of the job have altered their views on guns and gun control without the officers recognizing it. Jacob asserted that his job has barely had an effect on his views, and that increases in gun violence are because of society issues beyond the gun debate "[With] my line of work [my views on guns] its changed a little bit because as I said earlier there's a lot of people that have guns that I don't think should have them, but I don't think a sixteen year old is the problem, I think parenting is the problem." It can be conceptualized that Jacob is saying that parents who do not raise their children to have a "proper" upbringing, that is the problem with society, everyone needs to have some kind of socialization into firearms and firearm safety from a young age, no matter where they live.

Another officer, Judd, admitted that the unpredictable and risky nature of his job, has made him very cautious about everyone he meets this paranoia has led him to be more fearful of all citizens having access to guns:

I think that most people that do have concealed carries do follow the rules. You do a traffic stop on a vehicle, the first thing they tell you [to do] or are supposed to tell you to do [as a gun owner] is [tell the officer] "I do have a concealed carry permit, and I do have

my firearm on me.” It’s the first thing they’re supposed to do, that gives me a relief...then you still have to sit and think, “Ok, this person has a firearm what’s their mindset?” You don’t always know what their mindset is. So that reflects back to, always having a plan to kill anybody you meet, we’re sitting here [interview room at the department] right now. What if you pull that thing [pen] out and try to stab me with that. I’m thinking before we even sat down here, “How quickly am I going to be able to get my firearm out and put a round in your head?” That’s just the way I live. I don’t know who wants to kill me. Pretty much everybody wants to kill me. I have a badge. I mean you never know.

Judd has formed a sense of paranoia from working in law enforcement that he partly attributes to the fact that rural residents are known for having an abundance of firearms.²⁷

Brent, another officer who has only been in law enforcement for two years, does not think that working for a rural police department has altered his pro-gun views at all: “It’s an exposure to [the ideas] that not all guns are out there killing someone, or not all guns are being used to hurt someone. We run across a lot of guns that are never fired.” He admitted that rural exposure to firearms is what has ultimately affected his pro-gun identity, but he also admitted that he has far less experience in law enforcement, and therefore less exposure to the dangers of illegal gun activity. The more cautionary viewpoints and paranoia officers’ experience are from those officers who have been in law enforcement for a longer period of time.

Why would rural officers maintain an anti-gun control identity (as expressed in theme one) in the face of practical experience and self-reported views that support specific forms of gun control (as expressed in theme two)? Overall, the officers’ symbolic support for gun rights has

²⁷ In West Virginia, as recent as 2013, a sheriff was killed and in 2012 two state troopers were killed in the line of duty by gunfire (Officers Down Memorial Page 2014).

been strongly shaped by their rural upbringing. Officers stated that regardless of social class (e.g., hillbillies, hoity), a proper rural upbringing must include firsthand knowledge passed down by family formally about guns and gun safety. The officers themselves explained that gun culture is integrated into rural life, and admitted that it is hard for them to even understand why people in other parts of the country view guns as an important social issue. However, the findings from theme two suggest that these officers find themselves holding an idealized view of rural gun ownership because their social networks are dominated by people who are gun owners, police officers, and strong supporters of gun rights. Thus, in addition to their individual and professional socialization, their social capital, cultural capital, and sense of family and community inclusion is dependent on adherence to a rural ideology that places a strong value on individualism and gun rights. Many explained that in their rural culture, a reliance on guns is necessary to achieve “individualistic” goals of protecting oneself and family.

Criminologists Messner and Rosenfeld (2013:63) have agreed “Americans are deeply committed to individual rights and individual autonomy,” including a distrust of the government, and opposition to intrusive governmental regulations that limit individual rights. These values are more exaggerated in rural communities (Kohn 2004). Add to this the fact that rural communities have higher rates of gun ownership than urban areas and that the strongest predictor of opposition for gun control is gun ownership (Kohn 2004), it makes sense that officers who have been raised in and are living in rural communities would maintain a symbolic pro-gun stance. At the same time, they blame gun-related crime and child-injury on people who are ignorant about guns, gun laws, and gun safety, especially as those who reside in cities. To them, cities are foreign places where most gun-related violence occurs, and where responsible gun ownership is not a part of children's socialization, which exposes them to risk.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the literature in three major ways. Previous literature on the subject of gun control views focuses almost exclusively on the general public rather than police. This study offers an optimistic view of rural police officers, suggesting that their viewpoints on the topic of gun control are nuanced and explained by struggles over identity in a rural context. The fact that rural police officers symbolically oppose gun control distinguishes them from their urban counterparts, but does not distinguish them from those in the rural community they share. Rural police officers' dense social networks are popularly seen as strictly benefitting their efforts of social control, but many police officers feel the need to downplay their sophisticated views on gun safety as a result of these same networks. The ways in which community context and social networks suppress officers' stated support for public safety measures, such as gun control, require further investigation.²⁸

Three major themes emerged from our research. First, officers expressed a symbolic opposition to gun control, in part, because they believe that motivated criminals will violate any laws on the books to access guns, leaving upstanding citizens unprotected. Of special concern to officers were law-abiding rural citizens, who were raised with guns and live in places that are relatively isolated, leaving them vulnerable and in need of a means for self-protection. As members of a rural police department and as citizens of a state with the fifth highest rates of gun

²⁸ There are however, as with any study some limitations. First, there are problems with generalizability, we cannot say for fact that the views of these twenty police officers are the same views that would be held among all rural police officers. Another limitation would be the limited literature there is on the topic of police officers views on gun control, along with limited and often outdated research on rural people and police officers. Ultimately, because this is a qualitative study that relied on the officers self-reporting, we had to take what they said at face value, but there could be sources of biases. First, the officers could have selective memory about gun incidents, or about their upbringing where they leave out details. Secondly, the officers could recall events that occurred at one time, as if they occurred at another time. Thirdly, the officers may have attributed positive events to them but attributed negative events and outcomes to external forces. Lastly, officers may have exaggerated events as more significant than was suggested in other data sources.

ownership, it is not surprising that the officers express symbolic support for views of guns. These officers work and live within a “gun culture” which Kohn (2004:4) described as “a geographic locale where gun ownership is prevalent and where people are socialized into gun ownership and ‘pro-gun’ values.” Starting as young as three years old, officers’ families socialized them into a world of guns and tied this to the definition of a “proper” rural upbringing. Rural officers view rural gun ownership as symbolic of wholesome recreation and hunting subcultures, but view urban gun ownership as symbolic of a criminal subculture. In this theme, the officers’ identity is performed, “I am pro-gun.”

However, in theme two, officers admitted that as those who mainly work in a rural community, they still encounter many dangerous gun-related calls for service that involve people who are mentally or emotionally unstable, or who use guns incorrectly, irresponsibly, and with inadequate training. This contradicts the idealized view of rural gun owners as universally competent gun owners and suggests a somewhat collectivistic orientation in keeping with police officers’ focus on the protection of the larger community (Celinska 2007). Therefore, most police officers supported specific and far-reaching stricter gun legislation measures that they believe would keep guns out of the hands of those who should not have them.

As stated in part of the relational frame of identity, identity gaps show that one’s identities can and will contradict each other, while still coexisting and working together (Hecht and Jung 2004). As we see from our study, the rural gun owner identity and police cynicism lead to symbolic views of guns and a performance of a “pro-gun” attitude. Police officers are reluctant to give up a “pro-gun” identity, for fear of becoming urbanized and because a multi-faceted cultural identity is not allowed, the officers must present a more nuanced identity. Urban police officers tend to be for gun control. Similarly for rural officers, on the job socialization in

a rural police department has also changed their views about gun control and identity gaps leading to a more practical, nuanced, and sophisticated opinions about the merits of specific gun control measures.

In the third theme, officers talked about their childhoods growing up around firearms, expressing that rural upbringing strongly influenced their pro-gun identity in a universal sense, even as their job has exposed them to many situations in which guns have placed them and others in danger. This conflict between the symbolic and practical views forces rural officers to juggle multiple identities, creating tension and identity gaps. Hecht (2002) asserts that identity is a communicative process that must be understood as a transaction where messages are exchanged and symbolic linkages are obtained. The officers have to maintain many different relationships, which is part of Hecht's relational frame identity. The officers may struggle with their views on gun control, because they have different identities such as that of a police officer, husband, gun owner, and friend. Urban police officers, once off duty can blend into the general public, however, rural police officers are highly identifiable members of the community and under close scrutiny to meet expectations both as rural citizens who support gun rights and as police officers who support public safety. For instance, if officers openly expressed their stated views about stricter gun control measures, they could be perceived as rejecting rural culture, causing friction with their families, alienating them from the people with whom they work, and breaking their ties to the community.

In a time when the United States appears to be divided into red and blue on many political and social issues, our study points toward a positive future in bridging this divide as rural officers explain in detail which gun control laws they support and why and discuss the barriers to gaining public support. The findings suggest that those who support gun control

policies must take into account place hierarchies in which rural people feel marginalized and view gun control as an extension of that.

This study has implications for future gun control legislation. First, politicians must recognize the cultural meaning that guns hold for rural and urban individuals. Rural individuals reject gun control legislation because they do not witness nor are they victimized in gun related crimes. However, urban individuals see gun violence on a more personal basis and may not have been raised in the same ways as rural individuals and therefore have different viewpoints, typically supporting stricter gun control legislations. For example: from our study we found that rural police officers support citizens having concealed carry permits, but urban police officers have been found to not support citizens obtaining concealed carry permits. What we have gathered from this study is that these officers believe that the government needs to look at the current gun legislation and expand or improve those laws before establishing new laws. For example: the officers believe strongly that the gun-safety training curriculum needs to be improved for the average citizen, in addition the ideas for the curriculum needs to be fused with an audience of rural people. Future gun legislation needs to understand the marginality of rural individuals whom are often underserved and poor. Any interventions related to gun control that specifically targets a rural group has to understand that rural identity, marginalization in rural areas, and threats to rural culture, will often play a factor in the beliefs of rural individuals.

Future research should incorporate a larger sample of rural police departments, which could also include a distinction of views between federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. In addition, a comparative study should interview both urban police officers and rural police officers to compare narratives. Finally, it is important to conduct more research on rural police officers in general; because of uniqueness of rural culture and identity this research area is

very limited.

References

Associated Press. 2013. "Some West Virginia Sheriffs Oppose Proposed Gun Control."

Cumberland Times News. Retrieved August 12, 2013. (<http://www.times-news.com/local/x1633469388/Some-West-Virginia-sheriffs-oppose-proposed-gun-control>).

Baglole, Joel. 2014. "The M-4 Carbine Assault Rifle: History and Future." Retrieved April 19, 2014. (<http://usmilitary.about.com/od/armyweapons/a/m4.htm>).

Blake, Aaron. 2013. "Is it fair to call them 'assault weapons'?" *The Washington Post*. Retrieved April 19, 2014. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/01/17/is-it-fair-to-call-them-assault-weapons/>).

Bristow, Allen P. 1982. *Rural Law Enforcement. What's So Different?* Boston: The Allyn and Bacon Criminal Justice Series.

Brown, Katy. 2013. "Bouncer Stops Shooter, Carries Legal Concealed Weapon." WCHS News 8: Eyewitness News. Retrieved August 13, 2013. (http://www.wchstv.com/newsroom/eyewitness/1311213_21616.shtml).

Bulzomi, Michael J. 2011. "Off-duty Officers and Firearms." *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*. Retrieved August 13, 2013. (<http://www.fbi.gov>).

Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. 2012. Form 4473: Firearms Transaction Record. Retrieved August 20, 2013. (<http://www.atf.gov/files/forms/download/atf-f-4473-1.pdf>).

- Caplan, Joel. 2003. "Police Cynicism: Police Survival Tool?" *The Police Journal* 76(4):304-313.
- Carter, Gregg L. 2006. *Gun Control in the United States: A Reference Handbook*. Vol.1, *Chronology*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.
- CBS News. 2013. "U.S. Gun Control: A History of Tragedy, Legislative Action." Retrieved August 20, 2013. (http://cbsnews.com/8301-33816_162-57579452/u.s-gun-control-a-history-of-tragedy-legislative-action/).
- Celinska, Katarzyna. 2007. "Individualism and Collectivism in America: The Case of Gun Ownership and Attitudes Toward Gun Control." *Sociological Perspectives* 50(2):229-247.
- Chastain, Russ. 2014. "Definition of Hammer: Gun and Shooting Firearms Terminology" Retrieved December 1, 2013. (<http://hunting.about.com/od/guns/g/definition-of-hammer-guns-firearms.htm>).
- Ching, Barbara and Gerald W. Creed.1997. *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy*. New York City: Routledge.
- CNN. 2013. "Sandy Hook Shooting: What happened?" Retrieved September 1, 2013. (<http://cnn.com>).
- Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association. 2013. "Growing List of Sheriffs Associations and Police Chiefs Saying No to Obama Gun Control." Retrieved September 1, 2013. (<http://cspoa.org/sheriffs-gun-rights/>).

- Cooper, Frank R. 2008. "Who's the Man?: Masculinities Studies, Terry Stops and Police Training." *Columbia Journal of Gender and the Law* 18(3):671-742.
- Craig, Ashley B. 2012. "State Voters Reject Repeat of Sheriff Term Limits Again." *Charleston Daily Mail*. Retrieved September 5, 2013.
(<http://www.dailymail.com/News/201211070125>).
- Davey, Monica. 2013. "Strict Gun Laws in Chicago Can't Stem Fatal Shots." *New York Times*. Retrieved November 1, 2013. (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/30/us/strict-chicago-gun-laws-cant-stem-fatal-shots.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).
- Douglas, Brad. 2012. "Crime e-WV." *The West Virginia Encyclopedia*. Retrieved April 23, 2014. (<http://www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/1680>).
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2013. *Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted*. Retrieved September 6, 2013. (<http://www.fbi.gov>).
- Firearm and Injury Center at the University of Pennsylvania. 2011. "Firearm Injury in the United States." Retrieved February 1, 2014.
(<http://www.uphs.upenn.edu/ficap/resourcebook/pdf/monograph.pdf>).
- Harris, Kamala D. 2014. "Are large capacity magazines illegal?" *State of California Department of Justice: Office of the Attorney General*. Retrieved March 1, 2014.
(<https://oag.ca.gov/firearms/pubfaqs>).
- Head, Tom. 2013. "National Rifle Association." Retrieved October 1, 2013.
(<http://civilliberty.about.com/od/guncontrol/p/nra.htm>).

- Hecht, Michael L. 1993. "2002--A Research Odyssey: Toward The Development of a Communication Theory of Identity." *Communication Monographs* 60(1):76-82.
- Hecht, Michael L and Eura Jung. 2004. "Elaborating the Communication Theory of Identity: Identity Gaps and Communication Outcomes." *Communication Quarterly* 52(3):265-283.
- Hummon, David M. 1990. "Small Town Ideology." *Commonplaces: Community Ideology and Identity in American Culture*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Jacobs, Pearl. 1987. "How Female Police Officers Cope with a Traditionally Male Position." *Sociology and Social Research* 72(1):4-6.
- Johns, Joe. 2013. "Would Background Checks Have Stopped Mass Shootings: Probably Not." Retrieved April 19, 2014. (<http://edition.cnn.com/2013/04/10/politics/background-checks-mass-shootings/>).
- Johnson, Alex. 2013. "Police Chiefs, Sheriffs Divided over Gun Legislation." NBC News. Retrieved September 1, 2013. (http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/01/28/16740488-police-chiefs-sheriffs-divided-over-gun-control-measures?lite).
- Kessler, Glenn. 2013. "NRA Ad Claims that Poll Data Reflects Views of America's Police." *The Washington Post*. Retrieved September 1, 2013. (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/nra-ad-claims-that-poll-data-reflects-views-of-americas-police/2013/04/17/f32b82f6-a7ae-11e2-8302-3c7e0ea97057_blog.html).

- Kingery and Company LLC. 2011. "North Central WV Community Action Association Community Needs Assessment." Retrieved September 1, 2013. (<http://www.ncwvcaa.org/NCWVCAA%202011%20Community%20Assessment%20Update%20FINAL%20REPORT%203-17-2011.pdf>).
- Kohn, Abigail A. 2004. *Shooters: Myths and Realities of America's Gun Cultures*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary. 2014. "AK-47". Retrieved April 19, 2014. (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ak-47>).
- Messner, Steven F. and Richard Rosenfeld. 2013. *Crime and the American Dream*. 5th ed. Belmont: Wadsworth
- Miller, Tracy. 2014. "Gun Hospitalize more than 7,000 children per year in U.S. Study." *New York Daily News*. Retrieved February 1, 2014. (<http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/health/guns-injure-7-000-u-s-kids-yearly-study-article-1.1592703>).
- Moskos, Peter. 2008. *Cop in the Hood: My Year Policing Baltimore's Eastern District*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- National Institute of Mental Health. 2014. "The Numbers Count: Mental Disorder in America." Retrieved December 1, 2013. (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-numbers-count-mental-disorders-in-america/index.shtml>).
- National Sheriffs Association. 2013. "Office of the Sheriff." Retrieved September 5, 2013. (<http://www.sheriffs.org/content/office-sheriff>).

National Shooting Sports Foundation. 2013. "Firearms-Related Injury Statistics." Retrieved October 1, 2013. (http://www.nssf.org/PDF/research/IIR_InjuryStatistics2013.pdf).

Obama, Barack. 2013. "Now Is The Time: The President's Plan to Protect Our Children and our Communities by Reducing Gun Violence." Retrieved September 1, 2013. (http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/wh_now_is_the_time_full.pdf).

Officers Down Memorial Page. 2013. "Recently Fallen: Officers Killed in 2013, 2012, 2011, 2010, 2009." Retrieved September 10, 2013. (<http://www.odmp.org>).

Oliver, Willard and Cecil A. Meier. 2004. "The Four Stress Factors Unique to Rural Patrol Revisited." *The Police Chief*. 71(11).

Pew Research Center. 2013. "Broad Support for Renewed Background Checks Bill, Skepticism About its Chances." Retrieved September 20, 2013. (<http://people-press.org/2013/05/23/broad-support-for-renewed-background-checks=bill-skepticism-about-its-chances/#overall-trend>).

Pew Research Center. 2013. "Gun Control: Little Change in Opinions." Pew Research Center. Retrieved September 20, 2013. (<http://www.people-press.org/2013/02/21/section-1-opinions-about-major-issues/#gunsfebruary>).

Pew Research Center. 2013. "Gun Violence in America." Pew Research Center. Retrieved September 20, 2013. (http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/07/gun-violence-in-america/st_13-05-02_ss_guncrimes_03_drop/).

- Pew Research Center. 2013. "Why own a gun? Protection is now top reason." Retrieved September 20, 2013. (<http://www.people-press.org>).
- Porterfield, Mannix. 2013. "NRA Membership Continues Growing." *The Register Herald*. Retrieved October 10, 2013. (<http://www.register-herald.com/local/x1253336725/NRA-membership-continues-growing>)
- PR Newswire U.S.* 2013. "Colorado Law Enforcement Leaders Demand That Congress Act Now to Reduce Gun Violence." Retrieved September 1, 2013. (<http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/colorado-law-enforcement-leaders-demand-that-congress-act-now-to-reduce-gun-violence-198986151.html>).
- Prokos, A. and I. Padavic. 2002. "There Oughtta be a Law Against Bitches: Masculinity Lessons in Police Academy Training." *Gender, Work and Organization* 9(4): 439-459.
- Raasch, Chuck. 2013. "In gun debate, it's urban vs. rural." USA Today. Retrieved January 1, 2014. (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/02/27/guns-ingrained-in-rural-existence/1949479/>).
- Rahall Transportation Institute. 2013. "The Future of Transit in West Virginia." Retrieved April 20, 2014. (http://ntl.bts.gov/lib/51000/51400/51446/Future_of_transit_final.pdf).
- Roberts, Amy. 2012. "By the Numbers: Guns in America." CNN. Retrieved September 25, 2013. (<http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/09/politics/btn-guns-in-america/index.html>).

- Shelley, Tara O., Melissa S. Morabito and Jennifer Tobin-Gurley. 2011. "Gendered Institutions and Gender Roles: Understanding the Experiences of Women in Policing." *Criminal Justice Studies: A Critical Journal of Crime* 24(4): 351-367.
- Stanek, Richard. 2013. "Letter to Vice President Joe Biden on Gun Control Measures." Major County Sheriff's Association. Retrieved October 1, 2013.
(http://www.mcsheriffs.com/pdf/news/mcsa_letter_to_vp_biden_jan_2013_final2.pdf).
- Strauss, Anselm. 1987. *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. 2010. *Mental Health United States: 2010*. Retrieved December 5, 2013.
(<http://www.samhsa.gov/data/2k12/MHUS2010/MHUS-2010.pdf>).
- Tanfani, Joseph. 2013. "Keeping Guns Away from People with Mental Illness is a Complex Issue." *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved January 1, 2014.
(<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/sep/21/nation/la-na-shooting-background-checks-20130921>).
- The Office of the Attorney General. 2013. *West Virginia Firearm Laws*. Retrieved September 1, 2013.
([http://www.wvago.gov/pdf/gunrecep/West%20Virginia%20Firearm%20Laws%20Handbook%20\(January%202013\).pdf](http://www.wvago.gov/pdf/gunrecep/West%20Virginia%20Firearm%20Laws%20Handbook%20(January%202013).pdf)).

- United States Census Bureau. 2012. "State and County Quick Facts: Monongalia County, West Virginia." Retrieved September 25, 2013. (<http://census.gov>).
- United States Department of Justice. 2011. "Corrections Statistics by State: West Virginia." Retrieved April 22, 2014. (<http://nicic.gov/statestats/?st=wb>).
- United States Government Accountability Office. 2012. "Gun Control: States Laws and Requirements for Concealed Carry Permits Vary Across the Nation." Retrieved October 6, 2013. (<http://www.gao.gov/assets/600/592552.pdf>).
- United States Senate. 2013. "US Senate Roll Call Votes on Manchin Amendment." Retrieved September 6, 2013. (<http://senate.gov>).
- Violence Policy Center. 2013. "States With Higher Gun Ownership and Weak Gun Laws Lead the Nation in Gun Death." Retrieved April 23, 2014. (<http://www.vpc.org/press/1302gundeath.htm>).
- Walker, Samuel and Charles M. Katz. 2011. *The Police in America: An Introduction*. 7th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Watkins, Thomas. 2011. "Gun Control: LA Police Chief Supports Ban on High Capacity Ammunition Magazines." *Huffington Post*. Retrieved September 15, 2013. (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/02/policechief-charlie-beck>).
- Weisheit, Ralph A., David N. Falcone and Edward L. Wells. 1994. "Rural Crime and Rural Policing." *National Institute of Justice Research in Action*. pp. 1-15.

- Weiss, Robert S. 1994. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press.
- West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources. 2012. "West Virginia Bureau for Behavioral Health and Health Facilities." Retrieved October 6, 2013. (<http://www.dhhr.wv.gov/bhhf>).
- West Virginia Blue Book, 2000, "West Virginia Geological Survey U.S. Bureau of the Census." Retrieved April 23, 2014. (<http://www.wvdhhr.org/bph/oehp/atlas/popsqmi.pdf>).
- West Virginia Division of Natural Resources. 2014. "Hunting in West Virginia." Retrieved February 1, 2014. (<http://www.wvdnr.gov/hunting/hunting.shtm>).
- West Virginia Drug-free Workforce. 2012. "Governor's Drug-free Workforce" Retrieved January 1, 2014. (<http://www.faceyourfuturewv.com/drug-abuse-in-west-virginia.html>).
- White, Barbara. 2014. "Gun Owners as a Percentage of Each State's Population." Retrieved March 1, 2014. (<http://usliberals.about.com/od/Election2012Factors/a/Gun-Owners-As-Percentage-Of-Each-States-Population.htm>).
- Willer, Robb, Bridget Conlon, Christabel L. Rogalin and Michael T. Wojnowicz. 2013. "Overdoing Gender: A Test of the Masculine Overcompensation Thesis." *American Journal of Sociology* 118(4): 980-1022.
- Wozniak, Jesse and Christopher Uggen. 2009. "Real Men Use Nonlethals: Appeals to Masculinity in Marketing Police Weaponry." *Feminist Criminology* 4(3): 275-293.

Wyllie, Doug. 2013. "Gun Policy and Law Enforcement: Survey Results." Retrieved September 1, 2013. (<http://www.policeone.com/Gun-Legislation-Law-Enforcement/articles/6183787-PoliceOnes-Gun-Control-Survey-11-key-lessons-from-officers-perspectives/>).

Zahniser, David. 2013. "L.A. looks to ban possession of high-capacity gun magazines." Retrieved December 1, 2013. (<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/may/03/local/la-me-ln-ban-ammunition-lawsuit-20130503>).

Appendix 1

Table 1: Important Gun Control Legislation in the United States

Important Gun Control Legislation	
Gun Control Laws	Brief Explanation of Gun Control Laws
National Firearms Act 1934 President Franklin Roosevelt	-First major federal gun control legislation -Mandated those who sold “gangster type” weapons to register and pay taxes for the firearm transfer -Passed following the Saint Valentine’s Massacre
Federal Firearms Act 1938 President Franklin Roosevelt	-First federal limitations on the sale of ordinary firearms and required manufacturers, dealers and importers of firearms to obtain a Federal Firearms License -Passed following the Saint Valentine’s Massacre
Gun Control Act 1968 President Lyndon Johnson	-Placed severe restrictions on the importation of firearms and the sale of guns and ammunition across state lines -Passed following the assassinations of President Kennedy, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Sen. Robert Kennedy
Brady Handgun and Prevention Act 1993 President Bill Clinton	-Required a five day government business day waiting period for the purchase of a handgun -Passed following the attempted assassination of President Reagan
National Instant Criminal Background Check (NICS) 1998 Part of Brady Handgun and Prevention Act	-Established for Federal Firearms Licensees to call by telephone or electronically submit background checks for those purchasing firearms -A three-day waiting period was established, but most checks could be run within three hours

¹West Virginia gun legislation focuses on concealed carry permits, and the federal government regulates all other legislation (West Virginia Attorney General 2013). As of right now, 31 states recognize West Virginia’s concealed carry permits in which one is only allowed to conceal and carry a handgun (West Virginia Attorney General 2013). No state permit is required to possess a rifle, shotgun or handgun, and it is unlawful for any person to sell, give, rent or lend a firearm to a person that is prohibited from possessing such firearm (West Virginia Attorney General 2013). Police officers are not required to have a license to conceal and carry while on duty. In order to obtain a concealed carry permit one must take a training course and then submit an application to the sheriff of the county in which one lives. The sheriff is then responsible for issuing or denying the license within forty-five days after a background check is completed; the license is valid for five years.

Appendix 2

Interview Guide

Police Officer Job Information (Deputy Sheriffs, Sheriff)

1. Why did you want to become a police officer?
2. Did you work somewhere else before becoming a police officer?
3. How many years have you been a police officer?
4. What are two or three things that you like about your job?
5. What do you not necessarily like about your job?
6. Have you ever considered changing professions? If so, why?
7. How dangerous would you rate your job on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being least dangerous and 10 being most dangerous?
 - a. What job assignments would you rate as less dangerous?
 - b. What job assignments would you rate as more dangerous?

Personal History with Firearms (Deputy Sheriff, Sheriff)

1. Do you own any firearms? If so, how many? What kind?
 - a. Do you think the fact that you own guns has any effect on your opinion regarding gun control?
 - b. Why do you own firearms (i.e., for protection, hunting, second amendment rights, etc.)?
2. Did you grow up around firearms (i.e., hunting, father have firearms, etc.)? What kind?
3. Do you hunt? How often?
4. Are you a member of the NRA? Or was a family member growing up? Does this have any impact on your views on guns or gun control?
5. Have you ever been attacked or threatened with a firearm before, either while on duty, or off duty?
 - a. If so, have these incidents changed your views on gun control or guns? How?

b. Can you explain a particular incident that you were involved in where a gun was present?

6. How big of a problem is gun violence in this region?

Stricter Gun Legislation

1. What do you think gun control means? What does it aim to accomplish? Where does it go wrong?

2. Have your views on the use of guns or gun laws changed because of more recent gun violence in the United States?

a. Should the laws be stricter?

b. Which guns should have stricter laws if any (i.e. assault rifles, or all guns)?

3. Have there been any policy changes to this department because of recent firearm violence?

4. What are your general thoughts on concealed weapons permits?

a. Does it make your job easier? Harder? Why?

5. Should everyone who buys a gun be required to complete a safety-training course before buying the gun? Why?

6. Is there anyone who you think should not be allowed to purchase a gun or carry a gun?

7. What are your thoughts on Sen. Joe Manchin's proposed gun law change to expand background checks to guns purchased on the internet and at trade shows?

8. Do you think ammunition magazines that hold more than 10 rounds should be banned? Why or why not?

9. Do you think the ban on assault rifles should be reinstated? Why or why not?

Rural Context

1. To what extent do you think your views shaped by your rural upbringing?

a. To what extent do you think your views are shaped by working for a rural police department?

2. If you lived in a city do you think your views on gun control be different, why or why not?

3. Could departmental politics effect your view on gun control? If so, how?

Department Information

1. What is the structure of this department (e.g., para-military)?
2. What are the different ranks within this department?
3. How many total people are employed within this department?
 - a. How many officers?
 - b. How many civilians?
4. How many in this department carry a gun?
 - a. Is it part of their job?
5. What type of training do you receive?
 - a. Is it yearly?
6. What type of gun training? How often?
 - a. Low light training?
 - b. Do you receive enough in your opinion?
7. How many firearms instructors are within this department?
 - a. What does a firearms instructor do?
8. What is your jurisdiction?

Demographics

Rank:

Department:

Race:

Gender:

Age:

State where grew up:

County where grew up:

Political Affiliation:

Married:

Children:

Military Experience:

Highest Level of Education: