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Moving Target

Guns: Why do so many love them? Why do so many fear them? Seventeen takes a look across the great divide.

Every time an alienated teen stages a shoot-out at his school; every time some six-year-old accidentally kills a friend with his father's pistol; every time a depressed 14-year-old blows her brains out; every time a million moms march on Washington, D.C., or a thousand National Rifle Association (NRA) members meet at a convention, this country goes to war with itself. On one side of the chasm stand the 39 percent of our citizens who own firearms, the people for whom the right to possess guns and defend themselves is an intrinsic American freedom. On the other side are the growing numbers who want guns controlled, to whom the very notion of easy access to potentially lethal machines seems inconceivable. As the battle lines are drawn and fear and vilification take over, understanding, discussion and compromise go out the window. And in the meantime, an average of 11 American kids die each day from gunshot wounds. Until we understand why some Americans love their guns so much, why some fear them so much, how will we ever be able to work together to prevent innocent people from getting killed? In an attempt to help bridge the gap of understanding, I talked to four young people about why they use guns, why they fear guns and how they think the problem of gun violence in America should be solved.

Meagan: It's about skill and sport

Eighteen-year-old Meagan Curry stores her shiny

black 30-30 Winchester shotgun in her closet, tucked away behind her slinky, sequined, baby blue formal dress. She got the dress two years ago, and wore it when she was crowned Homecoming Princess at her high school in Oregon. The gun she also got two years ago, after she outgrew the 20-gauge model her parents gave her on her fourteenth birthday.

Meagan, a classic beauty—tall, blond, blue-eyed—feels as comfortable as a girlie girl in a gown as she does as a hunter in camouflage. Both identities have been a part of her since she was little. In those days, she played with dolls and hunted with her dad and brother. “I’ve grown up around hunting and guns,” says Meagan, as she drives her pickup through the lush Oregon mountains, where she stalks deer and elk. “When I was really young, I’d hunt with my family, but I wasn’t allowed to shoot. I first handled a gun when I was around five. It wasn’t loaded. Later, I shot clay pigeons for target practice. When I got older, I decided I wanted to hunt. Besides, my parents wanted me to know how to use a gun in case I ever needed it.”

So Meagan enrolled in a hunter safety course, where she learned everything from how to clean a gun to how to climb over a fence while carrying a weapon. It wasn’t the first time she’d been drilled on this kind of stuff. Meagan’s parents both

keep guns (for protection and sport), and they taught her early to treat any gun—even a water pistol—as if it were lethal. “My parents tell me that a gun is always loaded. You should always be safe with it, never point it at anyone.”

Meagan got her license and now spends much of her free time hunting in the woods. For Meagan, hunting is a sport, demanding strength, skill and concentration. She’ll hike deep into the forest, toting her heavy gear, sit still for hours in all weathers and rely on her instincts to know when an animal is around. Deer are lightning quick, and shooting one takes focus and sharp reflexes. (The family eat what they hunt, whether bird, bear or deer.) Meagan thinks of her gun as sports equipment, like a tennis racket or skis. Inner-city gun violence, suburban shoot-outs are a million miles from Meagan’s gun reality—even though she happens to live less than 25 miles from Springfield, Oregon, where in 1998 a teenager named Kip Kinkel killed his parents before opening fire on his classmates.

But Meagan isn’t naive about guns. She knows the difference between a hunting weapon and, say, the Glock handgun her dad carries for protection. “My shotgun is for killing a deer. That gun is for killing people,” Meagan says. And she knows that sometimes those people-killing guns fall into the wrong hands, which is why Meagan supports background checks (which investigate gun buyers’ records to help ensure that convicted criminals cannot purchase guns). As for those accidents that happen when little kids play shoot-’em-up with loaded guns, Meagan thinks the solution is education, not restriction. “A lot of kids aren’t aware of the damage a gun can do,” she says. “Parents should start educating them at a younger age, explain how serious guns are.”

Christina: It’s about power and protection

There are things that Christina Sierra* has done with a gun that she won’t talk about, not even now, as her once violent life fades into the past. But a look at the circumstances of her 22 years helps fill in the blanks: By the time she started wearing bras, her dad was beating her up regularly “like a guy, punching me in the face,” Christina says.

At 12, she was hanging with the gangs of inner-city Chicago, where she lived. At 14 she had a boyfriend who was jefe (boss) of a Latino gang—and so Christina became a gang girl for real. That was also the year she shot her first gun, a 9-millimeter semiautomatic. At 15, she was selling marijuana and cocaine with her boyfriend, pounds of it taped to her body under her clothes, along with the guns she always packed for protection stuffed into her jeans. At 16, she was almost killed when a rival gang ambushed her crew and started shooting in an alley. By the time she hit 17, another gang had put out a contract on her. When she was 18, Christina’s boyfriend had been shot and at least 10 of her friends killed. By the time she was 19, her boyfriend was in jail.

You can pretty much imagine the kind of things Christina did with her gun.

Yet Christina knows she’s just like thousands of other kids in many poverty-stricken corners of America where gang life—though it’s on the decline—still holds sway.

“My story don’t stand out or anything. This is like everybody’s story,” she says. Except that Christina’s story doesn’t end at the cemetery. When her boyfriend went to jail, he got involved with an international ministry that works to get gangsters off the street. When he was paroled last

year, Christina reluctantly started going to church services with him. Walking into the inner-city sanctuary, she says, “I found my home,” and has since become a believer.

Today, her tattoos and her photo collection—of Christina tough-faced, gun in hand, fingers displaying her gang’s signal—are the only visible signs of those former days.

She still visits her old stomping grounds, but now it’s to preach to the younger kids—the shorties, as she calls them—about trading violence for religion. “I didn’t mean to be in a gang or use a gun. I just fell into it,” she says. But the guns were addictive. “The first time I pulled that trigger I got a rush,” she says. “Power, that’s what I felt.”

Her gang kept caches of weapons—which they easily bought on the streets with money collected at gang meetings—all over the neighborhood. “We had everything: “.38s, Dillingers, .22s, 9-mms,” Christina says. “you used guns for everything. For protection. For revenge. To make you feel strong. It was so easy to get them.”

But what would it be like if it wasn’t so easy for kids to get hold of firepower?

“I can’t even picture a life with no guns,” Christina says, speaking haltingly. “But I know it would be a lot better. There would still be gangs, of course, because it starts with a clique, a little party crew. And people would kill in other ways, like beating you to death, but there would be so much less killing if we didn’t have the guns.”

Robert: It’s about competition and the Constitution

At 5’10” and 205 pounds, Robert Purdy is all brawn, an impression further enhanced by the heavy canvas shooting duds he wears when firing

his Anschutz rifle at the range. But hulking as he is, this guy is pure pussycat: The blue-eyed, goateed kid from Texas loves animals, is a dedicated student (he was homeschooled and at 18 is already in his third year of college) and is deeply religious. He’s anxious to counter the image that he thinks most non-gun folks have about guys like him. “People think that because I use guns, I’m a criminal, that I’ve already done something wrong just by owning a firearm,” he says.

Robert got his first shotgun when he was around nine, and has hunted sporadically with his family, although he says he’s never bagged anything bigger than a bird, but his passion for shooting came late. A year and a half ago he took up target practice at his 4-H club, and discovered that he was good, really good. He started practicing three or four times a week, and since last fall has been shooting competitively. Since then, he’s traveled to events all over the country and risen meteorically: At 20, he was the third-ranked under-21 male shooter in the state of Texas. When he talks of his future, he mentions things like NCAA shooting scholarships—maybe even the Olympics.

While he loves the sport, Robert is equally impassioned about what he believes to be his Second Amendment-backed right to own guns. “When the government takes away guns, it takes away the freedom that’s guaranteed in the Bill of Rights,” he says. And Robert—who’s president of his school gun club, a 4-H shooting coach and a member of various organizations, including the NRA—is worried that any kind of gun control, from trigger locks to background checks, is the first step in banning guns altogether. “I saw in an NRA video, Banned!, that that’s what happened in Europe and Canada,” he says. And now, because they don’t have any guns, the violence in those

countries has increased.”

Whether or not that’s the case (violent crime has risen slightly in some countries, though handgun homicides have not; these remain incredibly low in countries with strong gun-control laws), it’s clear that Robert truly believes that most gun-control advocates want guns prohibited entirely. It’s a fear he shares with thousands of Americans. It’s a fear that creates dramatic hostility to any kind of control, even in the face of a tragedy like the Columbine school shootings in Littleton, Colorado.

Even so, the murders and the accidental deaths trouble Robert. “I go back and forth on this,” he says. “As soon as they start making laws on gun control, they start taking guns away. On the other hand, you don’t want some city punks to be able to get hold of weapons easily and destroy something with them.” Robert believes the solutions lie in educating kids about guns (to prevent accidents) and instilling morals (to prevent murders), but he also knows such measures are unlikely to solve everything. “With or without guns, there are still going to be criminals and murders. There is still going to be violence,” he says. That violence, he thinks, is part of the price we pay for the right to bear arms.

David: It’s about compromise and common sense

But for David Winkler, 19, that price is just too high. “We don’t have to accept the levels of gun violence in America right now. We don’t have to accept it when kids get their hands on guns and kill other kids,” he says. For David, living as he does in Colorado, the Columbine massacre hit close to home. He and his friend Ben Gelt organized a local group called Safe Students and eventually joined up with Pax, a national non-

profit organization that works for gun control. David’s involvement got so intense that he put off college for a year to become co-chair of Pax Students, a project designed to involve young people in what David calls “sensible gun control.” Essentially, he’s seeking to generate a national campaign to educate all Americans about gun violence, as well as legislation like gun registration, assault-weapon bans and laws to hold adults responsible for what happens with their guns.

When David talks about the need for gun control, he tends to let the statistics speak for him. In the United States, more than 4,000 kids under the age of 20 died from gun violence in 1997 alone—that’s more than the number who died from all diseases combined. Gun fatalities are the second leading cause of death among young people (after car accidents). In 1998, firearms were used in two out of three murders in America. Teen suicides involve guns more than half the time (suicide is the second largest cause of gun deaths among kids after homicide; school shootings, while they make news, are actually rare). And try this for comparison: In 1996, handguns were used to murder 15 people in Japan, 30 in Britain—and 9,390 in the United States.

Neither David, nor Pax, nor most mainstream gun-control advocates want all firearms banned. “The majority of guns in this country are used for hunting. These are not the problem,” David says. “But why do we need assault weapons, guns that are made not for hunting or self-protection but for shooting large groups of people?” In this sense, it’s not the Meagans or Roberts of the world who keep David up nights. It’s the Christinas. It’s all the kids and adults who use guns to commit violence against others. “People focus on Columbine because it struck a chord, but Columbine is not the bigger picture,” says David.

“Around 11 kids die each day from gun violence. They die quietly, in ones and twos.”

When David travels the country, speaking to kids, he says he keeps hearing how scared teenagers are of gun violence. And he doesn't understand why some groups are so resistant to compromise. He hears lots of arguments like Robert's—guns are about freedom, a constitutional right that can't be messed with.

But, as David and other gun-control advocates point out, the First Amendment, which, among other things, guarantees the right to free speech, is also a constitutional right; yet even this right is limited: You can't jokingly yell “fire!” in a crowded theater, because people might get hurt. “I don't think we have to give up our freedom to make the country safe,” David says.

Problem is, there are forces at play that insist on framing the gun debate in absolutes: all or nothing, banned or unregulated. David isn't interested in extremes. “It's not all or nothing. There's a common ground that must be reached,” he says. It's among young people that David believes we will find that ground. “When I talk to folks about this issue, I usually find we have more in common than we have in disagreement.”