

## **inSocialWork Podcast Series**

### **Episode 285 - Social Work Practice and Gun Safety in the United States: Can Social Workers Prevent Gun Violence?: Drs. Patricia Logan-Greene and Mickey Sperlich**

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.inSocialWork.org](http://www.inSocialWork.org). We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:36] Hello. From Buffalo. All right. Welcome to the 2020 fall semester in our new world. Fear, the excitement, the anticipation and the resignation that this is our collective experience. That said, we're back and we're eager to begin our conversations with thought leaders in our profession. I'm Peter Sobota. Social work. Is the person and environment profession and the U.S. environment is awash in guns, guns owned and experienced by people. Our clients included. What do social workers know about guns? What about the different kinds of guns, the terminology, how to use them and how to store them safely? And did you know that many social workers pack heat themselves about this? What would you do if someone pointed a gun at you? Now that I have your attention in this episode, Drs. Patricia Logan-Greene and Mickey Sperlich describe their work exploring social work, practice and our ability to prevent gun violence. You may have heard that some folks are calling to respond to racial and caste disparities in policing by sending in the social workers instead of the police. Listen, as our guests argue that social work might be best suited to influence gun violence in the US and describe why and what the challenges are and are going to be. Patricia Logan-Greene PhD associate professor and Mickey Sperlich, PhD is assistant professor here at the UB School of Social Work. They were interviewed in July of 2020 by Adair Finucane, MSW and a prized graduate of the U.B. School of Social Work.

[00:02:19] I am Adair, and I'm here today talking with Mickey and Patricia about a project they have related to how social workers can prevent gun violence. So, Mickey and Patricia, how did you get interested in this topic?

[00:02:32] Well, we're very excited to talk to you about this today. I have always been a violence researcher in my career.

[00:02:38] However, I never did anything around gun violence. And a few years back, I was preparing to teach a course for the first time called Interpersonal Violence. And I knew I wanted to have a week related to gun violence.

[00:02:50] So I went looking for what I knew must exist. Something like everything social workers need to know about preventing gun violence. And I was shocked to find that there was very little in the social work literature about gun violence in any form, either prevention or even research on it. We do write some things about both interpersonal violence that involves guns as well as suicide. But it's really not been a steady focus of social work, research or practice writing, despite what a major impact that has on our public health.

[00:03:22] Yeah, and I guess I got interested in this when talking to Patricia and also having one of those sort of similar aha moments.

[00:03:30] So I'm a former midwife and now perinatal mental health researcher, and I've always been interested in violence or pregnancy and early parenting and that sort of thing.

[00:03:40] And I was looking at maternal mortality rates and ran across some research that just really struck me about how suicide and homicide are among the leading causes of maternal deaths and that these are actually far more prevalent than many of the obstetric conditions that might lead to death that we might routinely assess for.

[00:04:00] So things like pre-eclampsia. So that was fairly shocking. And I, too, was hopeful that there was a sort of body of literature in the social work field that might help us to understand this better and help us to address it. And it didn't really seem to be there.

[00:04:15] And I do want to emphasize there are a lot of researchers focusing on this problem and there are some social workers who have done some really good work, both on what social workers can do, as well as just researching the problem of gun violence writ large. So one of the first things we did was we started an article that was summarizing the current status of guidance for social work. We drew a lot from other fields. For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics has been very vocal for a long time about recommendations for all pediatricians, about how to talk with families, about particularly things around safe gun storage and children's access to guns.

[00:04:54] They had some interesting legal battles arise out of that, but they've really been leaders in the field. And since we've done this project, there's been a bit more from, for example, the National Association of Social Workers. And we found some other collaborators that we've talked with who are social workers, who have been working on the problems of gun violence.

[00:05:14] Yeah, it is a significant problem.

[00:05:16] As you know, if you look at the statistics from I think the last cities available from 2017 is that almost 40 thousand Americans died of gun violence during that year. 60 percent of which were suicide. Another 37 percent which were homicide. And another one point five percent which were attributable to police or law enforcement shootings. So this really is a high magnitude problem that we're trying to address.

[00:05:42] I also think it's really important to note a couple of things that don't get talked about in the public discourse. First of all, mass shootings dominate the news, in part because they seem so random and terrifying. But that's actually a very small fraction of gun violence in the United States is actually less than one percent, which is significantly less the number of people killed by the police each year. But beyond that, another important fact is that almost one hundred thousand people survive being shot every year. So we have large swaths of our country who are walking around with gun violence, wounds that they may have recovered fully. But in some cases it's going to result in lifelong health impacts and or disabilities, including the mental health impacts of having experienced that kind of trauma.

[00:06:23] Right. And not to mention the fact that just because somebody wasn't shot themselves doesn't mean they're not deeply impacted by either having lost someone to gun violence or by perhaps caring for someone who exactly has a gunshot wound or something along.

[00:06:39] That's an important point. I don't think there are many Americans who haven't known somebody that has either died or been seriously injured by gun violence. And we as a country are such an outlier in these issues compared to our peer nations that for us to see the gap in this research was really shocking.

[00:06:55] And I think both Mickey and I felt the strong need to step up and do what we could.

[00:07:00] We really were starting from very little guidance that particularly addresses social workers, which is kind of exciting because it means that if nobody's saying how to do it, maybe you get to actually have a say in how it's done. Right. That's the hope.

[00:07:16] Yeah. And I think it is an opportunity. But it's an opportunity in part because social workers of all the professions, we may be the best suited to intervene and prevent gun violence. We already talk to the populations that are most vulnerable to experiencing gun violence.

[00:07:33] And we talk to them all the time about very sensitive issues.

[00:07:37] This is what we do all the time, is that we talk to people about these things that may put them in harm's way.

[00:07:43] We try to do it sensitively and respectfully, even across ideological or cultural or political differences.

[00:07:50] So we're really well positioned to prevent all forms of gun violence if we can just figure out how to step up and start doing it with all that in mind.

[00:08:00] It seems like it's pretty evident why we would want to be having this conversation.

[00:08:05] You're working on a project or some projects right now. Can you talk a little bit about how you got started in the projects that you're doing and what that looked like?

[00:08:13] Yeah, so the first thing we had done is wrote an article, those current set of guidelines for social worker related to, as I said, there are some certain populations that are more vulnerable. And for that article, we chose families experiencing violence. So that includes both domestic violence as well as violence towards children in the home. In addition, kids and young adults, both in terms of accidental access to firearms as well as they're intentionally accessing because of social or mental health reasons, as well as adults in general, but particularly older adults who are at risk of suicide.

[00:08:48] So after having completed that literature review with a basic recommendations of what social workers can start to do, we wanted to go talk to social workers about what they're currently doing and whether or not they've had any training about how to have any conversations with their clients about firearms and gun violence prevention.

[00:09:06] We did a combination of both individual interviews as well as focus groups.

[00:09:12] So small groups of about six to 10 people and they were all social workers practicing in the field. And we did try to recruit with particular attention to people working in

those special areas. But a lot of times somebody's coming would bring another friend who's a social worker, and that was fine.

[00:09:27] So the conversations we had with them really spanned from just a very basic question.

[00:09:32] Do you talk to your current clients about guns at all? And if so, what does that look like?

[00:09:39] We prompted about whether or not they talked about asking about suicide risk. Maybe if they didn't ask about suicide risk, do they include conversations about whether they had access to guns as a particularly lethal means of attempting suicide? We also wanted to know if they ask families whether there are guns in their home.

[00:09:56] If so, how are they stored all those different issues? And then we also ask them questions about trainings that they'd experienced.

[00:10:04] And we asked them what they thought they would want to see, both in terms of more trainings that they won. What kind of content should be in those, as well as what they thought the role of social workers should be in preventing gun violence?

[00:10:18] Should they be advocating or should they be having these conversations more or not?

[00:10:23] This is something that social workers shouldn't be involved in. We really just wanted to get their opinions about this whole topic of gun violence prevention before we go out to the field of social work.

[00:10:32] And I think these were very interesting conversations to have. And a degree you were actually present at most of those focus groups and some of the subsequent individual interviews that we did.

[00:10:41] And I just wonder if you could share with us a little bit about how it was to conduct the interviews, how you felt the conversations went.

[00:10:48] Yeah, it was very interesting to have the opportunity both to do individual interviews and to run focus groups because they just have a different flavor. When you're talking to a group of people, ideas start to spin out organically. And when you're talking when one, it's just a different type of conversation. What I found in both circumstances, it felt like a pressure gasket being released.

[00:11:13] People really, really wanted to talk about this. And of course, you have a big, big pool of social workers and then the handful, relative handful of social workers who showed up to have these conversations.

[00:11:23] Of course, they're going to have a vested interest. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been spending their time having these conversations.

[00:11:28] But I found that people were really engaged and they came from all different perspectives.

[00:11:35] They were gun toting social workers. There were social workers who had basically never seen a gun before in their lives. So it wasn't as if there was just one sort of faction showing up. But everybody who came, it seemed like they all went.

[00:11:49] We can talk about this now.

[00:11:51] And I think that really is illustrated by what Patricia mentioned at the beginning, how there's so little research or was so little research about best practices for social workers with guns that are these social workers. We're actually pretty interested in the topic because of what they do for work. And of course, because they live in the world and they read the news and they're also looking around and saying, wait, what are we supposed to do? So it was a really excellent opportunity to tap into a group of people who had. And thinking about this, or maybe hadn't been thinking about it, but realized it was an issue, that they hadn't been thinking a lot about it.

[00:12:25] Right. So we got some findings in the study. People had things to say.

[00:12:29] We do. We have embarked on a process of content, analysis of the transcripts of both focus groups and the individual data. And to just walk you through our findings, kind of generally, I think there's sort of three generic categories of responses and comments and ideas that arose and that we think are pretty highly influential in the first. Just really confirmed that kind of what we thought was true was that similarly to how the literature and social works responds to gun violence is constrained. Also, social work training in this area is really constrained. We had a lot of folks tell us that there really wasn't anything available. They didn't get content on this in their undergraduate or graduate school programs. Some said that they did get some on the job training, but it was really focused on like if they were a school social worker, you know, drills for school shootings and that kind of thing. But not really anything very specific and certainly nothing about how guns work, how to safely store them, how to have these difficult conversations, that sort of thing. Some people did do lethality assessments, of course, and they would occasionally guns would come up in that, but it wasn't very systematic. So then the other sort of broad category that came up is talking about the perceived role of the social worker. So what is my responsibility in terms of addressing this? What's the appropriate circumstances to ask these questions? What do I do when someone disclosed to me that they have a gun that's not being safely stored or that they're having issues with the guns in their home or the work setting? And the other thing that really Rose was talking about, the social workers sort of individual beliefs about guns and gun violence as compared to what they perceived as their clients beliefs and views about guns and gun violence.

[00:14:13] Right.

[00:14:13] So, for instance, many of the people we talked to did talk about sort of recognizing that divide, that they really felt differently than they perceived that their clients thought. But they thought it was really important to maintain good boundaries. So, for instance, one respondent said that I have very strong boundaries when it comes down to my role as a social worker. I don't bring that at all. I have very strong views about guns and all of that, but I don't bring it to work at this same time that they had this sort of ethos of like, I'm going to really maintain those boundaries and not make judgments about clients. It also was personally difficult for them to hear the attitudes of clients sometimes and to know that things are not safe in their home, that they have attitudes that they see as sort of inherently risky and dangerous.

[00:14:56] So that's sort of the big picture in terms of all of that. How do we negotiate massive gun culture that we have in the US but still get that message out about safety and risk and all of that? So that's kind of the big picture in terms of the findings. It was very interesting.

[00:15:14] Yeah, it was very interesting. We had a lot of people saying more or less what we expected them to say, but we also had a lot of people saying very unexpected things. Yes.

[00:15:23] For example, some people talked about how they're not allowed to carry on the job, but they go to places where they felt very unsafe, not caring. So they carry it anyway because they knew that the chance of the police getting there in time were minimal.

[00:15:36] They also talked about their clients living in social situations where the clients felt they needed to have a gun on them in order to feel safe. One thing I think it's important to note is that we're really being agnostic on the issue of gun policy in the bulk of this project. It's not that we don't think gun control legislation is important. It's just. It's somewhat tangential to our central mission of trying to get social workers to talk to their clients about these issues. So we think that social workers, even those who are the most fierce Second Amendment advocates, would recognize that the main goal is to prevent our clients from getting hurt and from potentially hurting other people. So I think we can go ahead and have these conversations, regardless of how you feel about gun control writ large. It's still important to engage in this form of violence prevention.

[00:16:32] So, you know, in terms of the implications of our study, one of the big Take-Home pieces is that we still have a big need for that.

[00:16:39] What social workers need to know about guns chapter that I went looking for those years ago, and that's still really isn't out there. There are a lot of social workers who said that they just didn't know anything about guns. When people talk about guns, storage, safe gun storage, what does that even mean?

[00:16:55] Where they had personal fears about guns to the extent that they sort of actively avoided even finding anything out, right?

[00:17:01] Absolutely.

[00:17:02] And honestly, I think that so many social workers have such little personal experience with guns is why there is so little research on how to prevent the gun violence out there. But we do need to know things about this, just like we need to know things about, for example, safe sex practices. We need to know about the substance abuse. Just as responsible social workers in a diverse practice area, smoking cessation of substance abuse.

[00:17:28] You know, any number of public health issues.

[00:17:31] I mean, we have to have at least a little bit of knowledge or at least the knowledge about where to get more information if we need it. If it comes up with one of our client.

[00:17:38] And I also think it's important that there are so many contextual differences around the gun violence issues that social workers need to be aware of.

[00:17:47] For example, state statutes vary so widely about gun access that the advice to social workers in a state like California would be completely different than a state like Montana or a state where very different cultural and legal expectations around guns.

[00:18:04] You know, for example, in some states you have a very extensive application process in order to concealed carry.

[00:18:10] In other states, if you could pass the pretty minimal background check that is at the gun store or the person down the street who's selling you the gun, you can concealed carry with no problems. There's very few exceptions about where you can go with your weapon.

[00:18:24] There's geographical differences, but there's also the type of practice and it's, again, all these things that social workers are really good at. We're very good at understanding our current social you know, it's the foundational person environment context that social workers do all day long.

[00:18:41] I think if we can get some basic information out there to social workers about how to start having these conversations, we have the potential to make a big difference in the gun violence rates in our country in a better start somewhere.

[00:18:54] Something has to happen. So I'm really glad that this ball is rolling to go back to the context piece. I think it's worth mentioning, too, that there are different cultures around guns. There are cultures where having legal guns is more typical. You know, you have environments where hunting is a big cultural thing. You also have environments where having illegal guns is more likely. And there's so much that social workers could benefit from knowing about. How do you engage in a conversation about a gun that was purchased and has a license versus a gun that somebody may not legally be allowed to have, but is clearly owning for the sake of protection of themselves?

[00:19:30] It may even be seen as necessary from the perspective of a social worker and the client.

[00:19:35] There's so much specificity and context that needs addressing here because it's not a one size fits all answer for every conversation, even though safety is the overarching point. Right?

[00:19:48] Well, I have a quote from a participant. Here goes. Let's say someone pulls a gun on you. And I think we don't do it because we're afraid to scare people. But it's not like that isn't going through people's minds anyway. So just address it. What do you do if someone pulls a gun on you?

[00:20:06] So this is a social worker who's wondering, what do you do if someone pulls a gun on you? And we shouldn't be avoiding the question just because we're afraid of the answer.

[00:20:14] And I think, too, that things have really changed in our country and that a lot of that is really relevant right now with the pandemic and the marches against racial injustice and police brutality and everything. One might think that maybe the gun violence issue has sort of been laid to rest for a minute or, you know, is also on pause like the rest of our society. But that is not the case, unfortunately.

[00:20:42] The nation's gun violence epidemic is basically just grown during the pandemic. We were looking at some research just from the news. NBC, ABC looking at the increases in firearm fatalities in April of 2020.

[00:20:57] There was a 16 percent increase in May. A 15 percent increase compared to last year compared to 2019, even though so many Americans were home.

[00:21:07] Right. Supposedly sheltering in place. And May of this year also witnessed the highest number of mass shootings. And that's defined as more than four people being shot. We've been tracking that data since 2013.

[00:21:18] So clearly, this is not a problem that's just been temporarily placed on hold or anything.

[00:21:23] Right. May set a record. But then June immediately beat that record for the number of mass shootings since the data had been tracked in 2013.

[00:21:32] And very importantly, there is preliminary data suggests that suicide rates have also been increasing drastically. Estimates are that it's at least about a 20 percent increase in 2020 compared to previous times, according to studies from the every town for gun safety.

[00:21:48] I also think it's important to note our cultural response to the pandemic apparently was to go out and buy a lot of guns. There was an almost unprecedented surge in gun purchases at the early stage of this pandemic. I'm assuming people were worried about what kind of social unrest we would be facing and maybe that's still to come.

[00:22:05] We've certainly had some some social unrest we've seen in other parts of 2020, but a large portion of those purchases were made by first time gun owners. We have this very strange situation right now.

[00:22:18] An already strange year in which we have this unprecedented pandemic, we have unprecedented rates of buying guns in our country and we have some significant economic and mental health strains going on right now. And I don't think we know yet what the end of that story is going to be.

[00:22:36] Not to mention a bunch of people who just bought a gun for the first time who don't know how to shoot it and maybe don't store it exact class.

[00:22:43] And not to mention, you know, people being cooped up together and people who are already in domestic violence situations, that increasing and just overall rates of domestic violence are increasing right now during the pandemic as well.

[00:22:54] It's really placing people at a lot of risk.

[00:22:56] I think there are a lot of cities and states that are seeing all of these rates go up really dramatically.

[00:23:02] And this surprises people because it's not making the news as often, because everyday in our country is a big news these days. So it's not reaching the public discourse, but it has not gone away and may be getting much, much worse.

[00:23:16] One of the things that has made the news are the calls to defund the police.

[00:23:20] Many people have said bring social workers in instead of the police. Can you talk about what that might look like, concerns or support for, et cetera?

[00:23:29] Yeah, I mean, that's all very complicated, right? I mean, I think in the social workers have demonstrated that they can respond in very tricky situations and generally know about how to respond sensitively.

[00:23:41] Some know how to de-escalate. But the gun piece, I think that's probably pretty brand spanking new for social workers. How do I actually go about addressing someone who is pointing a gun at me or is threatening to kill themselves or somebody else? I think it's an apt call on the part of activists to say that we want to move to more community policing models, separating out a lot of the responses to different incidents to be on the part of social workers and to not be a police response. I think that's great. But who's going to train the social workers in these High-Powered de-escalation techniques and really, you know, walking someone back who's a threat to themselves or somebody else with a gun?

[00:24:19] Right. And one of the answers I think, to this is that we as social workers need to be able to talk to people about this issue, not just our clients, but about other people, that this course around gun violence is obviously very polarized in our country. And it's also very technical.

[00:24:34] Sometimes some of the laws are very technical.

[00:24:36] The laws pertaining to assault weapons in particular, which is the terminology that is virtually meaningless, but it's still the term that gets bandied about all the time.

[00:24:46] Assault weapons ban. We need to be able to have these conversations in an educated manner. And it doesn't mean that social workers need to learn all the technical aspects about guns.

[00:24:55] But we should know the basics of the policies. We should know what a set my hotted Mattick weapon is. And we should know what we're talking about when we talk about what kind of gun policies we want, we want to know the evidence behind those different gun policies that we're advocating for.

[00:25:10] And that's a piece of education that social workers simply aren't getting. We're certainly not saying we all need to be experts about it, but we need to have enough education to have these basic conversations and to talk to police if we're still going to start having a better collaboration about how to respond in our communities to emerging incidents.

[00:25:28] And, of course, the calls that they fund, the police and then social workers and instead are, that's a tremendously public conversation. We don't really have the time for today. But I think there's a lot social workers need to do to become responsive to this important issue in our communities before we can really take on that sort of responsibility.

[00:25:47] No doubt. And a man with that in mind. You're not done. You have other plans, right? What are the next steps?

[00:25:54] We have taken other steps. You know, we have this qualitative study that we talked about today.

[00:25:59] We've also coeditor a special issue of health and social work journal that was focused on gun violence, the first ever one, the whole issue and social work to focus on gun violence.

[00:26:09] So that happened and that was good. So we're sort of then in this information gathering phase, basically, and now we're trying to figure out how can we best go about the business of educating social workers about this.

[00:26:20] So we actually had a private funder who reached out to us when they heard that we were working on this issue to see if they could provide some funding to help us figure something out. So what we're developing is an online course to train social workers to recognize and respond to clients who might be at risk of gun violence, either for perpetration or victimization and also looking at suicide.

[00:26:43] We envision this being available widely to social workers and it would help fill some of those gaps that Patricia was talking about in terms of understanding state by state, what's happening. Some of the intricacies of that. What are the laws? What are the basics about guns? What are the different types of guns? What are the safety features on them? How do you do lethality assessments, suicidality assessments that directly address weapons? How do you do subsequent safety planning that takes all of that contextual factors into consideration and hopefully encouraging?

[00:27:17] Workers to find ways that they can advocate for clients and for themselves around these issues and to learn more. Certainly it's just going to be a starting point.

[00:27:26] We don't see ourselves as experts on guns or gun control, for that matter, but we think it's important. And that's what we bring to the table, I think is just seeing the importance of it and trying to generate more knowledge around it.

[00:27:37] Yeah. Absolutely. And I don't think it's necessarily a situation where we have to be firearm experts in order to start these conversations. Right. So we've certainly been trying to educate ourselves as we've gone through all three of us.

[00:27:52] For example, what, to a firing range and had a little lesson about shooting at there, in particular as a natural. I do love to shoot guns. I'm not I'm not a natural at shooting guns. They're very loud. Very, very loud.

[00:28:07] They're very loud. And I recommend anybody out there who does this make sure you get the heavy duty ear protection, because I couldn't hear in my one ear for four days after that.

[00:28:18] I think this is a great example of not needing to be an expert in order to be helpful. I think there's a toxin in our culture, especially even in the academic culture, where the idea is that we have to have such an extreme amount of expertise and to speak on something. And that's simply not true. It's important to be transparent about what you do and don't know.

[00:28:39] But to let that stop, you would have meant that a lot of work that's being done and that's going to be done on guns and gun safety with regards to social workers wouldn't

have been done. So I applaud your willingness to dove into something that was clearly important, even though you don't have years and years of experience on lobbying for gun control or whatever it is. Right.

[00:29:01] Well, I think even the work we're focusing here on social workers and how do we educate social workers around this issues. But the truth is that the knowledge that's been generated around this is across disciplines. You know, Patricia was talking earlier about pediatricians have really spoken out about this, for instance. And I think we need to really rest into those sort of multidisciplinary collaborations in order to generate content for social workers or for any human service worker, really with all of that in mind.

[00:29:27] It seems like it's pretty evident why we would want to be having this conversation globally.

[00:29:33] I think that's part of the reason that social workers have sort of backed off from addressing this, is because they do recognize that sort of divide between what they might think about guns and what their clients might think about guns are what the broader society thinks about guns. But I think one of the things that really came true for me in reading through these transcripts is that even though people have those stances, sort of preset stances, once you get into the conversation, they're really able to seem to relate at the level of nuance and to see that you can be a social worker who hunts and is a responsible gun owner and buys into some version of some kind of gun control and also can appreciate someone who is definitely afraid of guns and can address the topic. All right. So I think that the more we have these conversations and sort of as congenial way as possible with the facts present to every degree possible, then I think we could eventually start to move the needle on this. But we need to hear all those voices. I think I would agree.

[00:30:33] Thank you so much. You've been listening to doctors Patricia Logan-Greene and Mickey Sperlich discuss gun violence and social work practice on inSocialWork.

[00:30:51] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and Dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history or online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at [www.SocialWork.buffalo.edu](http://www.SocialWork.buffalo.edu). And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find that under the Community Resources menu.