

# RESEARCH NOTES

*Findings from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0*

## Congregations and Mass Violence: *More Questions than Answers*

**ON APRIL 15, 2021 INDIANAPOLIS** was thrust into national, even international, headlines because of the shooting at a FedEx truck facility near the airport. We asked our researchers to observe how their current eight congregations responded to this extremely visible example of gun violence, but we asked them as well to look in on the thirteen congregations we had observed in the past. We also used qualitative data analysis software to look for past mentions of violence or guns from our congregations.

Indianapolis already has experienced *three* mass shootings in 2021, two of which involved extended families. The FedEx shooting was notable because it occurred in a public venue, the victims were strangers to the shooter (as far as we know), and four of the eight victims were members of an identifiable immigrant community, Sikhs. In this instance, a variety of interrelated issues—gun accessibility, mental illness and Red Flag laws, bias against Asians or other immigrants—were at least potentially on the table as the city began the public process of sorting out the details.

Our researchers were surprised to find that the shooting was rarely mentioned by congregations on the weekend after it happened. Of the 21 congregations we were tracking at the time, only one made a forceful statement on gun violence in the immediate aftermath. The clergy leader of another congregation was highly visible during the following week in immigration-related meetings where the topic of violence against immigrants came up. One pastor made a clear reference to sin being the root cause of such evil. Beyond these, there were several mentions of thoughts and prayers, but no other direct statements.



Our analysis of previous social media post showed that 8 of our 21 congregations has mentioned violence or gun violence in the past 5 years. But this method does not track what might have been said during worship in those congregations. Two of our congregations—both very large—had made Facebook posts with links to anti-violence resources available within their respective denominations. Some of these references surfaced after Charlottesville in 2018.

It is not our job to imagine what congregations *ought* to do. But this was an odd moment when an Indianapolis community incident was the lead story on NPR and the BBC but was not widely mentioned by congregations during the times we observed. It caused us to wonder why this might be.


One possibility is that this issue was widely discussed in several congregations when we were not looking.

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Because of the pandemic, we are still doing our work virtually. We ask our researchers to observe online worship services and to monitor social media feeds such as Facebook. It is therefore possible this issue came up in mid-week services or adult education classes or discussion groups that we simply did not observe and did not pick up in our social media analysis. In an ideal world, our researchers would spend time in the field among the many activities of a congregation, but we are not doing that right now and are well-aware of the limitations this poses.

A second possibility is that many congregational leaders and members are highly involved in public policy or special purpose groups that address violence, but their congregations do not view this involvement as a congregational activity. We are all familiar with groups like Ten Point Coalition, and one of its founders is among our advisors. We noted that Faith in Indiana, a community organizing group focused on progressive issues, promoted anti-violence initiatives in the shooting's aftermath. A group of Butler-Tarkington faith leaders held a vigil at Christian Theological Seminary and were joined by the CTS vice-president for academic affairs. This vigil was for all victims of gun violence after the 76th homicide in Indianapolis in 2021.

So perhaps congregations, during their regular routines in worship or on social media, are just not the right place to look for direct talk about gun violence. Responses to these situations, which after all can be highly partisan and polarizing, may simply be an instance where parishioners live out their faith in other venues suited to public policy and social change.

A third possibility is that violence in general, and gun violence specifically, is a difficult topic for congregations. Americans hold very different views about guns and about the causes of (and cures for) criminal behavior. Soon after the shooting, the Center for Congregations published new resources, and updated existing ones, in its  **ngregational Resource Guide**<sup>1</sup>, on the specific issue of Responding to Mass Violence. They also highlighted a video guide for Worship in Times of Crisis and Trauma. These actions suggest that congregations are interested in addressing these issues as congregations. And it is possible we will see more of this in the coming weeks.

<sup>1</sup>Link: [https://thecrg.org/collections/Responding\\_to\\_Mass\\_Violence?utm\\_source=delivra&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Healing%20and%20Hope%20for%20Justice%204-2021&utm\\_id=41253391](https://thecrg.org/collections/Responding_to_Mass_Violence?utm_source=delivra&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Healing%20and%20Hope%20for%20Justice%204-2021&utm_id=41253391)



At one level, the social and cultural issues posed by the FedEx shooting seem simple. Everyone is against murder. Everyone agrees mass shootings are terrible. Most Americans favor some tighter gun restrictions, including restrictions on the kind of weapons used at FedEx. Targeting immigrant groups for violence is unacceptable.

But turning these general sentiments into political or cultural change is much more difficult. The US annually experiences between 14,000 and 15,000 homicides involving guns. Only 100 to 400 of these involve mass shootings, depending on how one defines the term. Many thousands more involve handguns; no more than a few hundred involve rifles of any kind. If all mass shootings and all assault rifle shootings ended tomorrow, American gun homicide statistics would barely register the change.

The issue of mental health is also extremely complex. The FedEx shooter was known to be a danger to himself and others; even his mother had reported him to authorities. He spent a brief time under evaluation and had a gun removed from his possession. But again, even a fully effective Red Flag law would have a limited effect on the number of gun homicides.



photo credit: Scott Olson


Anti-immigrant bias, specifically anti-Sikh violence in this instance, is also complex. Neither the *Indianapolis Star* nor the *Indianapolis Business Journal* have referred to this incident as a hate crime. National columnist  Anran Jeet Singh<sup>2</sup> (himself a Sikh) recommends starting from the premise that the incident was a hate crime as the safest way to approach it. But Indianapolis has historically been very cautious about assigning specific motives for crimes of this nature, and the state



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*People most committed to gun rights are much more likely to rank Second Amendment rights as their most important concern and to vote and contribute accordingly.*

rarely reports incidents as hate crimes.<sup>3</sup> Some groups, such as the Anti-Defamation League, argue that Indiana does not really have a hate crime law because they consider Indiana's existing law too vague.

<sup>2</sup>Link: <https://religionnews.com/2021/04/22/investigating-the-indianapolis-attack-as-a-hate-crime-will-keep-us-all-safer/>

<sup>3</sup>Link: <https://www.wrtv.com/news/state-news/number-of-reported-hate-crimes-in-indiana-drops-in-2019>

Nonetheless, many Sikhs did consider themselves targeted in the incident. Soulit Chacko, one of our project's postdoctoral fellows, spends considerable time in the field talking to members of immigrant groups, especially Asian women, in her own research. Sikh women in an ethnic beauty salon had no doubt this was a hate crime and saw Sikhs as a vulnerable immigrant group. Some Sikhs have called on the FBI to investigate whether the shooter visited white supremacist websites and whether this was a motive in his actions. But again, this is likely to be a thorny issue within congregations, and even some Sikh gurudwaras in Indianapolis have been hesitant to describe the incident as a hate crime until more is known about the shooter.

Discussions surrounding gun rights or gun control are among the most volatile in America. While most Americans support some further restrictions on gun ownership, support for private gun rights in general

remains high. Moreover, people most committed to gun rights are much more likely to rank Second Amendment rights as their most important concern and to vote and contribute accordingly. At the national level, the Supreme Court has become more supportive of gun rights since the 2008 *Heller* decision. At the state level, Indiana has made gun ownership less restrictive, not more. In the session just ended the legislature removed all fees from concealed carry permits.

While some congregations have considerable ideological homogeneity and can safely assume their members share similar opinions about gun ownership, larger, more diverse, congregations are likely to find the topic of gun rights difficult to navigate. Clergy who routinely receive pushback for being "too political" are unlikely to find gun violence an exception.

In a situation with more questions than answers, our project's primary interest is in framing the questions correctly and looking in the right places for answers. The story of congregational response to violence is an important one and our research experience over the past few weeks made it clear just how difficult it will be to tell this story accurately and effectively.

Written by Arthur E. Farnsley II

# { Questions

- 1 DO DISCUSSIONS OF VIOLENCE** or gun ownership come up in congregational settings other than worship? If so, how can researchers do a better job of tracking conversations such as those without being unnecessarily invasive?
- 2 HOW SHOULD RESEARCHERS** think about the links between congregations and issues like gun violence, especially when a variety of special-purpose groups include many people of faith, including clergy? Equally important, how do clergy think about the link between their jobs as congregational leaders and as community leaders?
- DO CONGREGATIONS HAVE THE CAPACITY** or the desire to discuss complex issues such as Red Flag Laws and whether certain acts of violence constitute hate crimes? If so, in what venues do they do this? Are clergy inclined to make such issues part of their congregation's ministry?
- HOW SHOULD RESEARCHERS** frame questions about congregational response to violence? What do people expect congregations as *congregations* to do? Are these expectations realistic? In thinking about the subject of religion and mass violence, are congregations even the right place to be looking?

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