



Wikipedia Project Part 3 – Reflection

I had never edited Wikipedia before this assignment, so this was a wholly new experience for me. I knew that Wikipedia could be edited by anyone, but I was very surprised to see how frequently a page like the one I was interested in was being updated. When I checked the change-log, I saw that it was being revised every day, and one of the mistakes I was planning on fixing in my revisions actually was removed before I could get to it. With that being said, and while it was nice to see a positive change made so swiftly by the community, I definitely understand and have a greater appreciation for why that Wikipedia cannot be used as a credible source for research papers. Particularly in the research section of the article I was working on, a lot of the information presented from studies was either incomplete or misleading of what I felt like were the authors' ultimate findings in their research.

As far as my comfortability with editing the article, I thought the tools provided by Wikipedia made it very simple with little technical knowledge required. The interface was very easy to use, and their automatic citation function is very helpful – by just inputting a URL, it would automatically format a full citation. I am very confident in the edits I made because I was able to source them all to what I felt like were credible articles, and I do not think any of the claims I made went beyond the scope of what the research would reasonably support. Ultimately, I am reminded that all scientific knowledge – even those backed by data and strong methods – is ultimately uncertain, and a broader array of research is always helpful and needed in reaching any confident conclusion.

I think there is some shared responsibility society has for providing accessible, reliable information to the public, and I am glad that places like Wikipedia exist, but I will say that upholding such a duty is a lot of work. Like I stated, I did not really think this was hard, but it took a lot of time to check the claims already made in this article (which is relatively small

compared to much broader Wikipedia articles on gun reform in general, for example) and then to compare them with other credible sources on the topic. The question of shared responsibility is a difficult one, because the alternative to free and accessible information that can be edited by anyone is information locked behind a price tag and gathered by those whose interests may be influenced more by their monetary rewards than their convictions in providing reliable information. This could probably turn into a whole philosophy paper, so I will keep my thoughts short and say that I think society – especially academics – have *some* shared responsibility for providing reliable data through sources like Wikipedia, but determining the exact extent of this responsibility would have to contend with the challenges posed by a lack of individual incentivization as well as the enormity of the job itself (there are a lot of Wikipedia articles out there).

I do feel like I have a better understanding of Wikipedia after this, and I definitely feel like I have a better understanding of the policy that I studied this semester (UBC). I have to admit, going into my research, I really expected research on gun reform and gun laws in general to be much more uniform and unanimous in its conclusions, but I quickly discovered that was not the case. One of my major takeaways from research that I had found as well as the sources provided on the Wikipedia article is that there is broad, overwhelming consensus on universal background checks, but it has left me wondering why that – with such popular support – nothing is ever done about it. I feel like any theories that I could make would rely on an elitist (as opposed to pluralist) view of the political system.

In conclusion, this assignment did get me to think critically about how information is produced as well as the general purpose and reliability of sites like Wikipedia. In finishing this assignment, one major concern I have about the philosophy behind Wikipedia is that everyone's contributions and information is treated the same. This is a very egalitarian ethos which I



generally would say is a ‘good’ motivating factor, but when providing information to the public, it simply is not true that everyone’s information has the same credibility. Biologists know more about biology, for instance, than an average citizen may. This does not just apply to those without training or education in a field however, as biologists would be similarly unqualified to give information on a public policy topic like UBC. This philosophy of equal access to editing is presumably what motivates Wikipedia to allow anyone at all to undo or remove recent changes to an article. So, while I know the changes I made today were well-researched and it seems unlikely that any of my edits overstepped the boundaries of the studies I cited, the information I added could nonetheless be removed or undone by a simple click of the mouse by someone who disagrees with the findings of the studies I cited on political or philosophical grounds. I also worry that this decision by Wikipedia gives some people the impression that **every** viewpoint/conclusion deserves to be given equal representation on the page even if one is more strongly supported by data and the relevant scientific community while the other may simply be promoted by political, economic, or philosophical interests that are not grounded in reality or the truth. While this may seem like a rather erudite, elitist critique on free information, it is not. I think there are valid concerns about allowing just anyone (who could be motivated by anything) to edit and remove information cited by or derived from experts in the field. I also should add that I fully support the information being free and accessible – I just have concerns about allowing **anyone** to edit it. Ultimately, I may be wrong in my criticisms, since there obviously hasn’t been a full takeover of Wikipedia lead by political or economic interests or trolls, but – as my experience confirms – it is easy for information to get distorted in the current form. I cannot help but wonder how different Wikipedia would look if greater editing authority was given to a committee or giant group of experts on specific fields which then would make decisions on suggested changes.

Wikipedia Project Part 1 – Literature Review

I will be doing my project on Wikipedia's entry for universal background checks (UBC). The article can be accessed [here](#). The article gives an adequate summary of the topic and attempts to provide some basic information about the policy's place in American politics, public opinion of the policy, and the policy's ultimate effectiveness. It achieves a basic overview of the policy – which may be all that can be expected of a Wikipedia page – but I have identified several points of improvement that I think would substantially improve the quality of the page. I should mention upfront that my edit to the entry will not be wholly comprehensive, and there will still be much room for improvement. With that said, I will detail some of the shortcomings I have perceived with the article, and I will also cite the sources I intend to include in my edits. The main sections I will be looking at in this article are those of the background, public opinion, private sale exemption, and studies of effectiveness.

To begin more generally, the article is quite repetitive in its use of the phrase “to date” or “currently,” and these are particularly problematic since 1. information regarding the topic is rapidly changing (as I will soon point out) and 2. the average person will not easily know when the phrase was written or if the information is still accurate. In sum, it unnecessarily draws into question the validity of its claims. This can be avoided by adding a static date to the information that was believed to be true at the time it was posted. I should note that I do not think this is necessary for all occurrences of these phrases, but there are a few particular instances where it is glaringly obvious that a better method could have been employed.

The first of these phrases comes in the second paragraph of the introduction. Following it, the article makes a claim that is now outdated and false. This is precisely why it is a bad idea to use this phrase in instances where information may plausibly become untrue in the near future. In



this instance, the article claims: “to date, 21 states and the District of Columbia require background checks for at least some private sales of firearms.”¹ This statement was accurate 6 months ago, but in July 2020, Virginia joined the list of states requiring universal background checks for all firearm sales.² This changes the accurate number of states to 22, according to the Gifford’s Law Center. I intend to edit this sentence to reflect the accurate count as of December 2020. This outdated information appears elsewhere in the entry as well, most noticeably at the bottom in a graph mapping all current UBC states and their particular laws. I intend to update this as well. While there are several other instances of these scattered across the article, I will simply say that I will edit them where it makes substantive difference, and now turn to the main sections of the page.

The background section offers a general overview of the problem which has spawned the creation of universal background check policies and makes general connections as to the relevance of the policy to the problem. The section begins by citing a statistic published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* which indicates that the number of gun acquisitions occurring without a background check has declined over time – from 40% in 1994 to 22% in 2015. While this is certainly an interesting statistic and not entirely irrelevant, the author nonetheless fails to make a connection as to its direct relevance to the policy. For instance, the author could have included changes in nationwide trends for background check policies occurring alongside the change in acquisitions with/without background checks in order to show an association. Without this, it appears as if the main point of including the statistic is to show a declining trend of gun

¹ To my surprise, when I went to edit this statement just a day after writing this report, the statement was gone. It seems it was removed entirely. A later occurrence of the false information still appears at the bottom however, and I will be editing that instead.

² Giffords, “Universal Background Checks,” Giffords Law Center, 2020, https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/background-checks/universal-background-checks/#footnote_21_4119.

acquisitions without background checks without giving any possible cause or commenting on the relatability to UBC (which is the topic of the article). In other words, it appears spurious and introduces unneeded noise to the article. The actual study that is cited from the *Annals of Internal Medicine* notes that this 22% of firearms received without a background check in 2015 – while lower than in the past – still represents millions of American adults who are receiving their firearms without regulation.³ This seems like a more relevant way to present the information, and I intend to make a change reflecting this. Ultimately, the source used in this case is authoritative, scholarly, and representative, but I believe the information could have been applied in a more succinct and relevant manner. As a side note, I will also say that one weakness of the study is that it surveyed respondents to ask if they underwent a background check when purchasing their firearm. Thus, respondents may have lied when taking the survey due to a “social desirability bias.”⁴

Next, also within the background section, at the end of the first paragraph, there is a missing citation for the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (CSGV). The article references the CSGV as stating that the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) has stopped over two million felons from purchasing firearms. However, there is not a proper citation to any such statement, and the hyperlink to CSGV’s dedicated Wikipedia page also contains no such statement. After some independent research, I was able to find a very similar statement in a report produced by CSGV in 2008. The report states that NICS “prevented approximately 1.4 million prohibited purchasers, including convicted felons, from buying

³ Matthew Miller, Lisa Hepburn, and Deborah Azrael, “Firearm Acquisition Without Background Checks,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 166, no. 4 (January 3, 2017): 233–39, <https://doi.org/10.7326/M16-1590>.

⁴ Miller, Hepburn, and Azrael.

firearms” in the period from 1994 to 2005.⁵ I intend to replace the unsourced information in the article with this information which I can credibly cite. Other citations in the background section appear as needed and appear credible.

I turn now to the section labeled “private sale exemption.” In addition to some historical notes, this section basically highlights the consequences of the private sale exemption and how that widespread UBC would close this loophole easily and fairly as opposed to narrowly targeting policy at specific current exemptions such as sales at gun shows or online sales. I believe this section could benefit from a very powerful statistic I found while researching; according to a study published in *Injury Prevention*, nearly 80% of all firearms used for criminal purposes are obtained through transfers from **unlicensed dealers**.⁶ This means that because of the private exemption, it is much easier for these unlicensed dealers to get around performing background checks, and this seems like a pretty clear point in time where potential criminals could be detected, and crime could be stopped early if UBC were implemented. Anyways, I think this will make a good addition to this section, so I will be adding this statistic to this section.

The “public opinion” section is quite thorough and various polls are cited properly here. One critique I have is that the polls are almost all from 2015. In addition to the fact that this was 5 years ago, it does not seem like a good idea to only use opinion data from a single year. For this reason, I would like to give some more recent polling data here. A report by NPR found that few public policy issues have as broad support as universal background checks (that’s really

⁵ “America’s Gun Shows: Open Markets for Criminals,” 2008, [https://web.archive.org/web/20081127024929/http://www.csgv.org/atf/cf/%7B79FD0842-518D-42AC-8228-AE59B7990689%7D/America’s Gun Shows Memo.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20081127024929/http://www.csgv.org/atf/cf/%7B79FD0842-518D-42AC-8228-AE59B7990689%7D/America’s%20Gun%20Shows%20Memo.pdf).

⁶ Katherine Vittes, Jon Vernick, and Daniel Webster, “Legal Status and Source of Offenders’ Firearms in States with the Least Stringent Criteria for Gun Ownership,” *Injury Prevention : Journal of the International Society for Child and Adolescent Injury Prevention* 19 (June 23, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1136/injuryprev-2011-040290>.

saying something).⁷ 89% of respondents in a July 2019 NPR poll indicated support for background checks on all private sales.⁸ Additionally, the Wikipedia author gives some emphasis to the bipartisan popular support for the policy, but I think this could and should be stronger. I am considering adding stronger emphasis to this as well. These two improvements should make this a strong section of the article overall.

The “effectiveness” section incorporates numerous studies published in academic journals which attempt to show relationships between universal background checks and other variables. This is one of the weaker sections of the article for several reasons. First, the author fails to clearly establish the relevancy of some of the study results to the goal of the policy. Since the goal of the policy is to close the private exemption loophole in hopes of reducing firearm mortality or firearm-related crime, it seems somewhat irrelevant to be discussing the compliance of some state agencies with background policies, for instance, as the article does in its third paragraph of this section.

Additionally, many of the articles cited as supporting the policy’s effectiveness do so through discussing the detrimental after-effects of the repeal of UBC. While I can see the logical connection here, it does not seem as direct as discussing what happens when the policy is implemented, and I am somewhat surprised to see how little direct evidence is incorporated here. I will be adding to this with the literature I have found (some of which will be discussed later) and by making edits to information already provided. I should note that research on the topic is complicated and not straightforward, but – from my understanding – UBC remains one of the strongest and most-empirically-supported policies for reducing firearm homicides. To give credit

⁷ Domenico Montanaro, “Americans Largely Support Gun Restrictions to ‘Do Something’ About Gun Violence,” NPR, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/10/749792493/americans-largely-support-gun-restrictions-to-do-something-about-gun-violence>.

⁸ Montanaro.

where credit is due, I will note that the article does highlight a direct, authoritative, and conclusive study published in 2019 in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* which found UBC laws were associated with a 14.9% reduction in overall homicides.⁹

Upon inspecting the sources cited in this section, I found one of the assertions made by the Wikipedia author to be misleading or rather misrepresentative. The second-to-final paragraph of the “studies” subsection includes a reference to research conducted by the Violence Prevention Research Program in the *Journal of Urban Health*.¹⁰ Part of this study’s findings were that comprehensive background check laws (which can usually be interpreted as UBC) not connected with a permit-to-purchase¹¹ law were associated with an increase in firearm homicide rates. While these were indeed the results of the study, the Wikipedia article seems to overemphasize the results because they do not include any disclaimer as to the studies’ own reservations about its findings. To be more specific, the study’s authors themselves claim that they have “identified no plausible theory to explain how requiring a prospective firearm purchaser to undergo a background check would result in increased homicide rates.”¹² They do, however, propose a theory to explain the correlation. Perhaps, they reason, that higher firearm homicide rates are what motivated these states to pursue UBC policies in the first place.¹³ If this were the case, the rates would already be high at the time the UBC was implemented, and so it is possible that the results may not be a good indication of the policy’s true effectiveness. While

⁹ Michael Siegel et al., “The Impact of State Firearm Laws on Homicide and Suicide Deaths in the USA, 1991–2016: A Panel Study,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 34, no. 10 (2019): 2021–28, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-019-04922-x>.

¹⁰ Cassandra K Crifasi et al., “Association between Firearm Laws and Homicide in Urban Counties,” *Journal of Urban Health* 95, no. 3 (2018): 383–90, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-018-0273-3>.

¹¹ This basically is just saying that the UBC law was not passed alongside a law requiring a permit to purchase firearms, meaning it may be easier for people to access firearms in these instances.

¹² Crifasi et al., “Association between Firearm Laws and Homicide in Urban Counties.”

¹³ Crifasi et al.

these concerns certainly do not repeal the study's findings, they are causes for reflection, uncertainty, and some skepticism in the external validity of the results. This disclaimer is missing from the Wikipedia article, and so I intend to add it when I make my edits.

I turn now to overviews of some of the additional research I have gathered to add to the article's 'effectiveness' section. The first study I intend to add is entitled "Firearm Legislation and Firearm-Related Fatalities in the United States."¹⁴ This was published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* in 2013. This study essentially analyzed all firearm-related deaths in all 50 states from 2007-2010. The study also collected measurements of the strength of various firearm legislation and regulations. Using these two measurements, correlations were established which found that higher numbers of firearm laws are associated with lower rates of firearm fatalities.¹⁵ More relevant to the topic at hand, the study found that stronger background checks were associated with lower overall firearm fatality rates.¹⁶ While the article notes that more research is needed, these results suggest a relationship between stronger background check laws and lower firearm-related deaths. I believe this would be a good addition to the research section.

Next is "Firearm Legislation and Firearm Mortality in the USA: A Cross-Sectional, State-Level Study."¹⁷ This was published in *The Lancet* in 2016. This study measured multiple variables' effect on overall firearm-related mortality. Among the variables measured is one relevant to my purposes – universal background checks. UBC was found to have the strongest impact of all 25 firearm state laws measured in the study, and the study's projection of federal-

¹⁴ Eric W Fleegler et al., "Firearm Legislation and Firearm-Related Fatalities in the United States," *JAMA Internal Medicine* 173, no. 9 (May 13, 2013): 732–40, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2013.1286>.

¹⁵ Fleegler et al.

¹⁶ Fleegler et al.

¹⁷ Bindu Kalesan et al., "Firearm Legislation and Firearm Mortality in the USA: A Cross-Sectional, State-Level Study," *The Lancet* 387, no. 10030 (2016): 1847–55, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(15\)01026-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)01026-0).

level implementation of UBC finds that national firearm mortality could drop from 10.35 deaths per 100,000 people to 4.46 deaths per 100,000 people.¹⁸ The paper concludes by noting that implementation of universal background checks could “substantially reduce firearm mortality in the USA.”¹⁹

To conclude, I intend to make approximately 8 substantive edits to the Wikipedia article for universal background checks. My edits will consist of a mixture of newer, relevant research and polling data as well as corrections to untrue, uncited, misleading, or outdated statements made in the current version of the article. In making these edits, I will draw on 9 different sources ranging from academic articles, to public opinion polling, to reports and websites by advocacy organizations. Taken altogether, I hope that my changes will significantly improve the accuracy and relevance of the Wikipedia article for UBC.

¹⁸ Kalesan et al.

¹⁹ Kalesan et al.



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