


gun problem and its importance for society are the costs of gun violence, which include not only the costs stemming from gunshot injuries but also the costs of all the efforts to deter shootings or protect against them. For example, it is estimated that the costs of gun violence in the U.S. are approximately \$116 billion per year (in 2004 dollars). These costs increase our individual health insurance rates nationwide — what does this mean?

Banning all guns is not suitable nor realistic among public health prevention workers who

seek not to blame but rather to prevent, reduce, and ameliorate substantial health risks. Public health prevention strategies (before the injury) that do seem to work to reduce gun-related “accidents,” homicides, and suicides, include hospital and community-based programs (like CeaseFire in Chicago) that work to stop victims from shooting others — the most common form of street gun violence. Effective strategies for reducing gun violence also include using tested school curricula. These strategies would eventually prove economically wise. 

The Frisco Kid

JESSICA ZIMMERMAN

Born and raised in San Francisco, I was a Manhattan transplant during college, rabbinical school, and a few years beyond. In the liberal and intellectual enclaves where I was educated — formally and informally — I did not know a single person who would fathom owning a gun, let alone keeping one in the glove compartment of their car. Then, I moved to Phoenix.


It was 117 degrees outside on the day I arrived. On finding my air conditioner broken, I set out to Trader Joe’s to fill my fridge with cold drinks and lots of ice cream. There, I was greeted by a huge sign hanging next to the entrance stating, “No Weapons on these Premises.” “No weapons??” I mumbled audibly, “Trader Joe’s is known for its tasty salsas and spiced pecans. What is this about weapons?”

As I met people during my first weeks in Phoenix, I started asking about the sign. I learned that owning a gun in Arizona — even within the Jewish community — wasn’t unusual. Apparently, I had chosen to become a rabbi in the Wild West. As I met congregants, I’d ask, “Do you have a gun?” With each affirmative answer, my shock grew deeper and my questions more incredulous. “Are there rabbis here with guns? Where do you keep your gun? Why do you have a gun?” People answered very openly about their gun ownership. When I asked the middle-aged president of the congregation — a real estate developer who drives a Cadillac convertible — his answer concurred with many other people’s: “Rattlesnakes,” he said. “Rattlesnakes??” I asked. While I could not fathom the scene, I heard that answer frequently. I never saw a rattlesnake in Arizona, aside from the one behind glass in the

Sonoran Desert Museum.

The conversation about guns dominated my first few months in Phoenix. In addition to the still-puzzling reptile explanation, some people told me that it was human intruders they feared. They feel safer with a gun in the house, they said, since it would allow them to protect their families. Others told me that I shouldn’t worry, since I had probably unknowingly been in the presence of thousands of guns while riding the subway in New York. Still others told me that we as Jews, should respect our Constitutional right to bear arms, since many Jewish communities throughout history had no way to defend themselves from government-sanctioned anti-Jewish actions.

I never got used to the reality that many people in Arizona (and elsewhere in America) choose to exercise their right to carry a licensed gun. I often wondered if any of the synagogue employees had a gun...or maybe one of the parents of a student coming to a bat mitzvah rehearsal in my office. Did the little old lady in the front row on Friday night have a gun in her purse?

One Shabbat, an argument broke out between two congregants. Before I moved to Arizona, I would have felt sure that nothing more sinister than yelling would take place between two members of a synagogue in the parking lot. But once I realized that most of the Jews in Arizona pack heat in case they encounter a particularly aggressive rattlesnake — or fellow congregant?? — I couldn’t be so sure. Half joking, I stepped between the two arguing men and said, “Guys, you know we have a policy of no shooting in shul on Shabbes.” 

Rabbi Jessica Zimmerman, Synagogue 3000’s Director of Congregational Engagement, is passionate about helping synagogues transform into *kehillot kedoshot* — sacred communities. Ordained at HUC/NY in 2003, she began her rabbinate as Marshall T. Meyer Rabbinic Fellow at Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in Manhattan and then moved to the Wild West to become the Grace and Horace Goldsmith Rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel in Phoenix, Ariz.