Social Problems, 2023, **XX**, 1–16
https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spad034
Advance access publication 11 July 2023
Article

OXFORD

Armed Citizens on the Border: How Guns Fuel Anti-Immigration Politics in America

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ABSTRACT

To make a nation on stolen land using enslaved labor, the early American state relied on gun and immigration policy to create a well-armed white settler population. This legacy continues to animate modern conservativism, which is staked on supporting gun-friendly and anti-immigrant policies. Despite this history and ongoing political reality, however, the sociology of migration has largely ignored the relationship between firearms and immigration politics. To explore this relationship, the current study draws on 20 months of ethnographic data from the U.S.-Mexico border. I show how contemporary American gun culture bolsters anti-immigrant organizations through two mechanisms. First, gun shows and shooting ranges are important sites of *recruitment* among anti-immigrant groups. Second, the thrill of handling firearms mitigates the monotony of everyday anti-immigrant activism, while also easing the disenchantment that participants may otherwise feel about the effectiveness of their actions in bringing about long-term change. The article concludes by urging scholars of American politics to be mindful of the legacies of settler-colonialism and to take seriously the reinforcing effects of guns on nativist politics.

KEYWORDS: anti-immigrant; guns; SB 1070; U.S.-Mexico border; settler-colonialism.

On April 23, 2010, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed into law what was at the time the country's strictest immigration enforcement bill—Senate Bill 1070. Sponsored by Republican State Senator Russell Pearce, SB1070's most provocative measure empowered Arizona police to investigate the immigration status of anyone they suspected of being undocumented. Civil rights organizations decried the bill for encouraging racial profiling against Latinos and others assumed, based on their speech and appearance, to be "foreign." Lower courts in Arizona immediately blocked SB1070 (Magaña 2013). Over the next two years, however, Arizona's "show me your papers" law inspired 23 other states to introduce "copycat" bills, of which five were successfully ratified (ACLU 2022). Although the U.S. Supreme Court eventually struck down three of SB1070's measures, it reinstated the most controversial provision, which allowed police to stop and detain anyone suspected of not having immigration papers (*Arizona et al. v. United States* 2012).

The national uproar around SB 1070 distracted public attention from another, equally significant, and closely-related win for conservative Arizona legislators. A week before signing the "show me your papers" bill into law, Governor Brewer had approved another piece of Pearce-sponsored legislation. This other bill eliminated the requirement for a state-issued permit and safety training to carry a concealed weapon (CBS 2010). Just like Pearce's immigration bill, the success of this permitless carry legislation inspired pro-gun lawmakers in other places. In 2010, Vermont and Alaska were the only

The author would like to thank Ben McCord for his support and encouragement throughout the project. The three anonymous reviewers' thoughtful feedback and Kristin Simpson's editing magic elevated the article's quality. Please direct correspondence at the Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, 725 Spadina Avenue, Toronto, ON M5S 2J4, Canada; email:fidan.elcioglu@utoronto.ca.

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other permitless carry states in the nation. Within a decade, however, 22 states had deregulated gun carrying in public spaces (Giffords Law Center 2022a). Moreover, like the "show me your papers" law, the Arizona-born gun rights campaign also culminated in a landmark decision when the Supreme Court ruled that governments can *regulate* the carrying of firearms in public for self-defense—but not *prohibit* it (*NYSRPA, Inc., et al. v. Bruen 2022*).

Attributing these two laws to the aberrant extremism of Arizona's Republican Party misses the fact that arming civilians and restricting immigration are age-old tools of American nation-making. Historically, the Second Amendment enshrined the white supremacist exigencies of settler-colonial life: In order to appropriate Indigenous lands and control enslaved Africans, the early colonies and, later, the fledgling American state *required* settler households to be armed, while making it compulsory for every white male, no matter their class, to participate in a militia or slave patrol (Dunbar-Ortiz 2018; Hadden 2001). During the nineteenth century, armed white settlers were instrumental in fighting off Mexican settlers and Indigenous tribes—the so-called "enemies of new settlement"—in newly acquired U.S. territory that established the nation's modern border with Mexico (Martinez 2014:665). Meanwhile, the desire for a *white* nation led U.S. lawmakers to be among the first to implement and the last to dismantle race-based naturalization and immigration rules (Fitzgerald and Cook-Martin 2014). Thus, the American nation was made possible only by handpicking and then arming its white members.

This history notwithstanding, the sociology of migration has largely ignored the relationship between firearms and immigration politics, with minor exceptions (Flores 2015). This omission ignores several ethnographies documenting the armed nature of anti-immigrant activism in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands (Elcioglu 2020; Johnson 2021; Shapira 2013) and studies of how immigration control laws contribute to the perception that immigrants, and people of Mexican descent more generally, are harbingers of crime (Flores and Schachter 2018). Meanwhile, a burgeoning sociology of guns has demonstrated how Americans—especially white men experiencing social, economic, and physical insecurity—celebrate armed self-defense as a form of citizenship (Carlson 2015; Stroud 2015; Yamane 2017), while attributing their insecurity to the presence of racialized Others (Carlson 2015), especially immigrants (Drakulich and Craig 2022). The discursive construction of Mexican immigrants, and Hispanics more generally, as "illegal" and "criminal" further reinforced these racialized fears (Drakulich and Craig 2022), so that in some states, such as Arizona, "pro-gun rights sentiments... inflect the politics of migration" (Carlson 2020:18).

Building on these insights, the current study demonstrates some of the mechanisms by which firearms can perpetuate anti-immigrant activism. Drawing on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork (2011–2012, 2017) with a Minutemen-like anti-immigrant group at the Arizona-Mexico border, this article shows how guns assuage these rightwing activists' despair about their prospects of creating a more fortified America. I illustrate how gun culture facilitates the recruitment and retention of group members. At the end of the article, I suggest additional areas of inquiry in the immigration-guns nexus. I conclude by urging scholars of American politics to heed the legacies of settler-colonialism and take seriously how guns can bolster nativist politics.

THE POLITICAL EFFECTS OF STATE INTERVENTIONS

As border "vigilantism" hit the news, scholars began critiquing the social science literature for unwittingly reinforcing rather than problematizing the state's understandings of migration (De Genova 2002; Nevins 2002). According to Nicholas De Genova, even research that was politically sympathetic to immigrants' struggles (e.g., Chávez 1992; Coutin 2000) either downplayed or ignored the role of law in illegalizing migration. And, by ignoring law, De Genova maintained, extant scholarship gave the impression that "illegality" was a "transhistorical fixture" (De Genova 2002:431). He argued that, instead, migrant "illegality" was something that was actively constructed through immigration law.

A new stream of scholarship thus began documenting the ways that immigration law reified "illegality." It discussed how restrictions on "legal" migration from Mexico (De Genova 2004) and militarized border enforcement (Nevins 2002) together essentialized a juridical status—undocumented—as an inherent condition associated with criminality and Mexican-ness. Others began

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exploring the growing role of criminal justice institutions in punishing immigrant "illegality" and the discursive consequences this crimmigration system had on society. Laws racialized Latinos as criminals in the eyes of authorities (Armenta 2017; Macías-Rojas 2016; Menjívar, Cervantes, and Alvord 2018) as well as ordinary people, such as white Americans (Flores and Schachter 2018). Local-level anti-immigrant legislation, too, had social consequences: These laws escalated white residents' anxieties around social disorder and motivated nativist activism (Flores 2014 and 2017).

Ironically, the top-down emphasis on immigration law's discursive power can easily reproduce the transhistorical essentialism De Genova criticized. For instance, some scholars have traced grassroots anti-immigrant activism to border militarization and immigration enforcement policies (Andreas 2001; Doty 2009; Kil and Menjívar 2006; Kil, Menjívar, and Doty 2009). In this view, the state's violent policies and rhetoric "brutalized" not only immigrants but also the broader American public (Kil et al. 2009:301). Therefore, anti-immigrant sentiment and groups like the Minutemen are unsurprising manifestations of the law's dehumanization. Albeit important for denaturalizing "illegality," this top-down approach risks giving anti-immigrant mobilization a veneer of inevitability.

However, people's interpretations of state discourse are rarely straightforward (Auyero and Joseph 2007) and can be shaped by intersectionality and social position (Elcioglu 2020). Moreover, ethnographies of rightwing groups have shown how there is rarely a one-to-one correspondence between the state's rhetoric and people's own ideas. For instance, rightwing opponents of industry regulation and redistributionist policy can be just as concerned with environmental pollution (Hochschild 2016), rising income inequality (Cramer 2016), and the wellbeing of historically marginalized groups (Fields 2016) as their leftwing counterparts, reconciling these ostensibly contradictory positions in unexpected ways. How ordinary people understand state interventions is, therefore, seldom clear-cut.

The top-down approach also ignores the fickle nature of collective mobilization. Recruiting new members, sustaining their participation, and preventing their exit are ubiquitous challenges among organizations engaged in political struggle (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Prieto 2018). Indeed, recently, "non-participation" has become just as much an area of inquiry for social movement scholars as participation (Pickering 2023). The Minutemen themselves experienced such challenges. By 2007, many members of this Arizona chapter had resigned, citing alienation from their leader's shifting priorities (see Shapira 2013:149–51). Indeed, the organization's demise occurred *despite* the state's unrelenting militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border during this period (Miller 2014). Thus, while immigration law may encourage anti-immigrant groups, it guarantees neither their emergence nor longevity. Collective mobilization requires fuel. This article illustrates how guns can serve as that fuel, keeping the motor of anti-immigrant groups going, despite numerous roadblocks.

Migration Politics and Guns

Migration scholarship has referenced guns, albeit unsystematically. The most unambiguous discussion linking the two topics was again a demonstration of law's productive power. It showed how when local ordinances in Pennsylvania framed immigrant presence as threatening, gun sales increased across the state (Flores 2015). Meanwhile, ethnographic studies have recorded guns' drawing people into anti-immigrant activism and vice versa. For example, scholars documented how Minutemen-type organizations recruited new members at gun shows (Elcioglu 2020:224; Johnson 2021:111–17; Shapira 2013:2), where one was likely to encounter men with "military habitus" who found gun-centered activities comfortable and comforting (Shapira 2013:76). Conversely, anti-immigrant activism can catalyze gun-rights ideology among unlikely candidates—such as an elderly white grandmother in California (Johnson 2021:111–17) or a Vietnam War draft resister in Arizona (Shapira 2013:73–95).

These documented links between firearms and anti-immigration politics are not surprising, as sociologists of guns have acknowledged that guns are social objects imbued with meaning. Guns were initially tools of "necessity" among freemen in the colonial era; they then evolved into leisure implements for hunting and sports by the twentieth century, as gun manufacturing capacities increased (Hofstadter 1970; Yamane 2017). By the 2000s, however, *self-defense* trumped recreational pursuits as the primary reason Americans purchased guns (Jones 2021). Moreover, armed protection became a symbolically loaded way for gunowners to negotiate the (impossible) norms of masculinity and personal responsibility (Carlson 2015; Stroud 2015). By arming themselves, Americans—especially

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white men experiencing socioeconomic marginalization (Carlson 2015) and physical decline (Stroud 2015)—fashioned themselves into morally upstanding, masculine "citizen-protectors" of their loved ones (Carlson 2015). Race-based fears of crime bolstered this new gun culture.

Studies about illegality, ethnographies of anti-immigrant activism, and the emerging sociology of guns together suggest that weapons make civilian patrols of the U.S.-Mexico border engaging. As restrictionist laws naturalize illegality, social problems are increasingly attributed to racialized criminal Others, and fortifying the border to stop migration assumes heightened importance. Tapping into the masculinist power of guns (Carlson 2015), civilian-led border control activism restores a sense of mastery, self-worth, and purpose to those who feel increasingly irrelevant in American society, such as aging male veterans (Shapira 2013), working-class white men (Elcioglu 2020), and elderly women (Johnson 2021).

What we understand less, however, are the exact *mechanisms* by which gun culture shapes and strengthens immigration restrictionism. The current study, which draws on fieldwork data about an anti-immigrant organization in Arizona, shows how its participants always grappled with the conviction that their actions had little political consequence. This shared sense of futility persisted even when control of the White House transitioned from an ostensibly immigrant-friendly administration to a more explicitly nativist one in 2017. My respondents' willingness to keep mobilizing was not guaranteed. Instead, this desire to keep policing the border was something that had to be reproduced over time. Guns were essential for this project of renewal.

Specifically, I identify two mechanisms by which guns sustained anti-immigrant mobilization. First, gun culture fostered institutional spaces where nativist groups could recruit new members. Second, the thrill of handling firearms allowed activists to withstand the often-monotonous nature of border policing and its questionable impact. Thus, I suggest that the survival of the anti-immigrant group in this study would have been unlikely in the absence of guns.

METHODS AND DATA

This article draws on ethnographic, interview, and content-analysis data from a larger study about the social roots of immigration activism in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands (Elcioglu 2020). While the larger project followed participants in five organizations in Arizona, the current study on guns focuses specifically on one group that I refer to as the "Soldiers." Data about the Soldiers come from initial fieldwork in Southern Arizona from January 2011 to June 2012, followed by a field revisit from January to April 2017. Additionally, twelve of the eighty-six formal life history interviews I conducted for the larger project were with members of the Soldiers. I also draw on extensive content analysis of documents, videos, media coverage, and online content produced by or about the Soldiers.

Ethnography is a well-established technique for accessing the everyday ways that people navigate their social realities and what these micro-processes reveal about larger social structures (Burawoy 1998). This method is a particularly valuable approach for uncovering social processes that are normally obscured. In my study, for instance, an ethnographic approach revealed an unanticipated finding: Despite their dedicated participation, the Soldiers did not believe their mobilization would bring about more restrictionist immigration policies. By observing their day-to-day activities, I came to see how firearms mitigated this sense of futility, which otherwise threatened to disrupt the group's survival.

This article also demonstrates how ethnographic revisits help reveal whether a fieldsite has changed over time (Burawoy 2003). In this study, I observed the Soldiers shortly after the 2010 Senate Bill 1070 drew the national limelight and the White House's ire (Magaña 2013). I then returned to Arizona in 2017, when the political pendulum had swung the other way: The United States' first Black president, purportedly supportive of immigrant rights, was succeeded by an openly racist head of state who had referred to Mexican immigrants as "rapists" (C-SPAN 2015). Against this changing backdrop, guns continued to be instrumental to the group's ability to recruit and retain members.

Positionality and Entry into the Field

In early 2011, I emailed the Soldiers to introduce myself as a PhD student researcher. Ben,[1] one of the group's founders, invited me to attend their next meeting. As a dark-featured woman of Middle

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

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Eastern background, I was part of a "liminal racial group" (Maghbouleh 2017) that did not clearly fit into any of the prominent ethnoracial categories in Arizona. That my respondents saw me as a racial outsider was unmistakably clear when some inquired about my legal status shortly after I introduced myself to them. My gender identity also ensured that I was an outsider in this male-dominated and hypermasculine group, as did my general unfamiliarity with guns and my youthful appearance.

Paradoxically, however, my outsider status facilitated my entry into the field because my presence gave the Soldiers an opportunity to perform (white) masculine protectionism or show their willingness to protect women and children (Young 2003). The Soldiers thought of the Arizona desert as a dangerous place, particularly for unarmed women. "Rape trees," for instance, were common lore among the men (see Johnson 2021:49–51). According to this popular discourse, Mexican smugglers assaulted female border crossers, then took their victims' underwear as trophies to hang on trees. This rape tree rhetoric "marked violence in the borderlands as distinctly male and Mexican" (Johnson 2021:49), while simultaneously lionizing white American men as protectors of women and the vulnerable feminine nation. My respondents interpolated any woman in the desert (and particularly a racialized one)—like me—to be naïve, non-threatening, and vulnerable. My presence was largely tolerated, and sometimes even welcomed, because it allowed respondents to perform this protectionist code.[2]

Case Study

It is difficult to determine the scope of the anti-immigrant movement. However, for 2011 (the year I began fieldwork), the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) identified 185 "nativist extremist" groups nationwide (SPLC 2012) that "target[ted] individual immigrants rather than immigration policies" (SPLC 2010). Most were located in border states, including Arizona (SPLC 2012). Seven years later (when I returned for a field revisit), the SPLC reported that the total number of "nativist extremist" groups had declined to just 15 (SPLC 2017). A lot had happened in the interim. Most crucially, the 2009 rise of the Tea Party movement, the subsequent "remaking of Republican conservativism" (Skocpol and Williamson 2012), and the resulting "normalization of nativism" had culminated in Donald Trump's 2016 election (Bloch and Myers 2018). The SPLC (2017) surmised that the elevation of extremism into mainstream electoral politics had led to a decreased number of grassroots nativist groups.[3]

The Soldiers, however, managed to survive. The group had originally evolved out of a local Minutemen chapter when the larger movement crumbled between 2007 and 2009.[4] The group adopted a new name and developed a fresh organizational website and social media presence. By late 2010, the Soldiers had officially established themselves as an independent 501c(3) organization. Their mission was to conduct self-directed reconnaissance patrols near the Arizona-Sonora border in an effort to assist the U.S. Border Patrol.

When I first encountered them in 2011, the Soldiers boasted 20 core members and 20 to 30 occasional participants. The majority were white men, of which roughly half were Vietnam War veterans. The group's main activity was to install hidden cameras in Arizona's Sonoran Desert to spot undocumented border crossers. When the cameras captured "suspicious activity," namely, dark-skinned people walking on a path, the Soldiers emailed the time-stamped footage and GPS data to their contact in the U.S. Border Patrol. The Soldiers also posted the footage on their website to demonstrate the state's need for civilian border patrol assistance. Armed and dressed in military fatigues, members also went out on monthly day-long "search-and-rescue" patrols.

By 2017, a change in the group's leadership helped transform the Soldiers into an even more militarized outfit. Rather than transmitting camera surveillance "intel" to the Border Patrol, the Soldiers now used it to determine the base camp location for weeklong musters in the desert. And, instead of

[2] For a more detailed discussion of my experiences as an ethnographer in this fieldsite, see Elcioglu 2020: 235–47.

[3] One should approach SPLC's estimates with caution, however. Strong online presence can belie the precarious nature of an organization, just as weak online presence can conceal a group's grassroots vitality. Indeed, SPLC's 2011 count misses the Soldiers. For a more detailed discussion of the methodological challenges of tallying extremist groups, see Elcioglu 2020:244–45.

[4] For a discussion of the Minutemen's dismantling under Chris Simcox's leadership, see Shapira 2013:149–151.

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remotely monitoring migrant footpaths, the group conducted in-person surveillance of trails, often 48-hour stakeouts. These new tactics led to more frequent encounters with border crossers, whom the Soldiers detained (or tried to detain) until Border Patrol agents arrived on the scene. While members continued to still be mostly white men, the changes in the organization's strategy attracted younger participants. The average Soldiers 2.0 participant had served more recently. Likewise, most participants were not yet retired, often working in law enforcement.

Despite their differences, neither the earlier nor the later Soldiers believed their actions would bring about a more fortified, restrictionist country. The next section explains the micro-processes by which guns helped the Soldiers thrive despite this skepticism.

FINDINGS: HOW FIREARMS SUSTAIN ANTI-IMMIGRATION ACTIVISM

The Futility of Collective Action

Guns helped resolve a glaring problem for the Soldiers: No matter how much time, volunteer labor, and resources the group invested in policing the desert, participants were well aware that they were not going to deter border crossings in Southern Arizona.

When I met him in 2011, Ben seemed frustrated by the infrequency of migrant encounters. An IT technician, he was a founding member of the Minutemen chapter that, in 2010, became its own independent organization. Ben managed the group's online presence and took charge of its monitoring cameras.

Ben's favorite part of being a Guardsman, however, was getting into his expensive tactical gear, driving south to within minutes of the U.S.-Mexico boundary line, and spending the day in "search-and-rescue" (SAR) patrols.[5] According to the Soldiers' training manual, the SAR team's "primary mission" was to search for and report "illegal aliens" to the Border Patrol, while providing medical assistance to migrants in distress. The guide claimed the Soldiers' patrols were "much harder and more dangerous than a typical SAR" because migrants rarely wanted to be rescued. This required participants to wear camouflage, move quietly, and stay vigilant "against attacks from drug runners, bandits, and illegal aliens who do not wish to be found." The alleged hazardousness of these SARs missions disturbed Ben's wife. "[My wife] bitches about it," Ben admitted grimly, "But the way I see it, I'm doing it for her and for my son. I don't want them to live in a shithole country. I think it's worth the risk and the time that I take to do this. She understands, but would still rather I not do it."

Ben's gendered remarks about the importance of his participation and the training guide's emphasis on danger belied the infrequency of encounters, let alone "rescues." Ben himself readily admitted this fact: "It's dead. Here [in Arizona's desert], there, all of America; it's been dead everywhere. Border Patrol, ranchers, everybody says so. If we hear activity is picking up somewhere, we'll check it out, but it's been dead."

When the Soldiers' organizational predecessor, the Minutemen, was founded in 2005, U.S. Border Patrol reported apprehending 1,189,075 migrants along the nation's border. By 2011, however, this total had declined 71 percent to 340,252. The "Tucson sector,"[6] where the Soldiers conducted their SAR patrols, saw a 72 percent decline in encounters in that period (Customs and Border Protection n.d.).

Sam, a 46-year-old white man, was also frustrated by the group's bleak track record with migrant encounters. When I interviewed him in 2011, Sam had been a Guardsman for two years. He had quickly risen through the ranks to become a "squad leader," leading groups on missions. He patrolled the desert nearly every weekend. According to Sam, the problem was not just that the trails were "dead," as Ben claimed, but also that the Soldiers had a narrow tactical repertoire:

[5] The pleasure he drew from being in the desert is perhaps best captured by an incident that occurred the first time I accompanied Ben on a desert patrol. Accidentally missing our turn-off that led to the area we were meant to patrol, Ben grinned, put his truck in reverse, and sped backwards for half a mile. "This is why I love doing it [being a Soldier]," he exclaimed gleefully, "because you can't pull this kind of shit in the city."

[6] The "Tucson sector" is the Border Patrol-designated area covering most of Southern Arizona. It stretches 262 miles from the Yuma County line to the New Mexico state boundary.

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> Actually, to be honest with you, I wish we were more aggressive in some of the stuff that we do. Just going and seeing the cameras every week, seeing the cameras every week, seeing the cameras every week, is ehh [*shrugs and rolls eyes*]. I'd like to see us be more proactive of actually going and finding these people more often.

The group no longer did overnight stakeouts, for instance, even though the desert "traffic" intensified in the dark and cooler hours. There were also active trails that the Soldiers avoided. It seemed almost as if "we [the group] don't want to get involved," Sam complained.

When I returned for a field revisit in 2017, I half expected the Soldiers to have disassembled. Border Patrol migrant encounters continued to drop precipitously in the Tucson sector until 2018, and the numbers plateaued across the rest of the U.S.-Mexico border. How much "intel" could the Soldiers hope to relay to the Border Patrol? And what, then, was their raison d'être?

The group *had* survived, however. Under new leadership, the Soldiers prepared for week-long musters in remote parts of the desert and began to accommodate extra-local participation. When patrols lasted only hours, participants necessarily had to live nearby unless they were able to find local accommodations. However, when the group began camping out in the desert for a week—or even two—out-of-towners were able to participate. Moreover, these gatherings took place closer to the actual international boundary where there were a limited number of viable trails for migrants. The Soldiers then reliably came across border crossers at every muster.

They also transformed into a more militarized outfit. By 2017, the group no longer referred to itself as a search-and-rescue unit but as a voluntary "security service," as one member explained, something akin to a private defense contractor for Customs and Border Protection. In the weeks preceding the quarterly "ops," Rick, the Soldiers' leader, would study the group's camera footage to determine where to set up their base camp as well as the best locations for 48-hour stakeouts. In other words, the footage was no longer just an end in itself but had become the means for actually intercepting "persons suspected of illegal activity."

Despite these developments, the sense of futility remained. It took on a different character, however: Rather than feeling frustrated by the lack of encounters, the Soldiers were overwhelmed by the immensity of the task before them. "We hurt them [the drug cartels]," Tommy, a 49-year-old participant, said. "Like a dent, a small dent," he added. Did he see any end to unauthorized border crossings? "No," he answered flatly. Even Rick, the group's leader, was aware of the Soldiers' limited impact. On our first meeting, he distinguished cartel smugglers from the *coyotes*, or guides, of an earlier era. "They're called [drug] 'mules' for a reason," he explained. Able to withstand the scorching desert heat while carrying almost a hundred pounds of drugs and supplies, the cartel's "men" were "frigging animals" who never gave up, Rick maintained. How much smuggling could the Soldiers—with their comparatively limited resources—actually deter? Rick did not contradict my implied doubts. "Then I guess, I'll die here," he grumbled. "Everybody makes a choice in life about what they do."

The extent of the drug cartel's sophistication became even clearer when the Soldiers began to intercept the coded radio chatter between scouts and guides.[7] Billy, a software engineer, had tinkered with a computer program that eventually began unscrambling the chatter into numbers and code words in Spanish. Tommy, a native Spanish speaker, slowly began to crack some of the cyphers using discrete events as reference points—such as radio chatter when a Border Patrol helicopter flew overhead. Based on these reference points, the Soldiers eventually worked out the basic organizational structure and elaborate chain of command of their nemesis. While the scope of this knowledge excited Tommy—"imagine how much intel we'll have," he enthused—it simultaneously made him aware that their efforts were largely in vain.

This shared sense of futility threatened the sustainability of the Soldiers, as it would any voluntary organization that depended on its participants' enthusiasm and energy. The next section examines how gun-centered activities generated the culture, community, and institutional structures that reinforced the appeal of anti-immigrant politics and shored up group membership.

[7] In the desert, cartel *scouts* tend to be stationed, often for weeks, at observation posts on hilltops and mountainsides. They are tasked with directing smugglers from the U.S.-Mexico boundary to their destination. The scouts tend to be in radio contact with the smugglers' *guide*, or the point person on the ground who is actually steering the group. For a nuanced discussion of how cartels are organized and contribute to violence in the borderlands, see Slack 2019.

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Soldiers 1.0: Building Gun Culture through Tactical Search-and-Rescue "Ops"

Sam was a 46-year-old white Arizonan contractor. Sam had always wanted to pursue law enforcement, however. He had unsuccessfully applied for such jobs after dropping out of high school in the depressed economy of the early 1980s. "The City of Mesa is hiring eight new officers. But if you show up for an application day, there's 400 applicants lined up," he recalled, shrugging. Eventually Sam gave up on his dream. He still maintained a keen interest in guns, though, and dipped into his tight earnings to build a significant collection. It was by acquiring firearms that he had first encountered the Soldiers:

> The first time I heard of the Soldiers was at a gun show. Yeah, they had a booth with some pictures and stuff. They had a computer set up with a video of all the stuff we catch with cameras. So, I thought to myself, that's something I could do to get involved with something I see as a problem and actually be proactive in something.

Most of the other Soldiers I got to know from 2011 to 2012 were recruited at gun shows. Held at fairgrounds and civic centers, and open to the public, gun shows are highly popular events where licensed retailers and private vendors can sell firearms, gun-related parts, and other merchandise. According to one estimate, there were 2,377 gun shows held in the United States in 2007, of which 59 (or 2.5 percent) were held in Arizona (Wintemute 2009: 57-58). In 2011, when I began fieldwork with the Soldiers, gun shows occurred approximately 4 to 5 times per month in Arizona.

In Arizona, purchasing a firearm from a federally licensed dealers' place of business requires the prospective buyer to undergo a background check and a waiting period, but these regulations do not apply at gun shows (Giffords Law Center 2022b; Wintemute 2009). This so-called "loophole" makes gun shows attractive to purchasers, sellers, and traders of firearms. Given the close alignment of firearm ownership with conservative politics in the United States (Burbick 2006), gun shows serve as a platform for rightwing ideas (Wintemute 2009:238–59) and anti-immigration messages (Johnson 2021:111–17; Wintemute 2009:247). During fieldwork, I learned that, for approximately $100 or less, a 501(c)3 organization could set up a booth, hand out leaflets, and chat with politically likeminded people as they filed through these spaces. The Soldiers had recruited many of their most dedicated members at gun shows.

That gun shows were important recruitment spaces was not surprising, given the pervasiveness of firearm-related content in the Soldiers' instructional material for new members. The organization's online training modules were clearly intended for those familiar with firearm use and gun culture. For instance, although the Soldiers called their desert activities "search-and-rescue" operations, only one of the training's ten modules discussed basic medical assistance. Meanwhile, five modules were about firearm use. All SAR team members were required to either have an Arizona Concealed Carry Weapons (CCW) permit or to have completed a basic firearms safety class.[8] Additional firearm and tactical training was also strongly encouraged, and the modules were studded with hyperlinks to local companies offering courses on "handgun martial arts" and "gun-fu." By contrast, the Soldiers made first aid training optional to new members. And, while prospective Soldiers could easily find resources for close-quarters firearm use, the modules contained no comparable links to places that offered basic first aid and CPR training.

A few weeks after I interviewed Sam, I accompanied him, Ben, and another Guardsman, who simply referred to himself as Phantom, to Sam's compound. The site served as the group's makeshift headquarters and was located in a sparsely populated settlement about 45 miles north of the international boundary. The compound was fenced off by six-foot-high cinder blocks and a steel gate. The compound housed not only Sam's modest mobile home but also a gunsmithing workshop, where Sam stored his bullet reloading system that put gun powder and primer back into used shells and a lathe to remove metal from gun barrels to make them lighter. Customizing his gun collection was one of Sam's favorite pastimes. Inside just one cabinet, I counted 38 guns, including pistols, rifles, and shotguns. I

[8] Most firearms safety courses in the United States are run by the National Rifle Association, giving the organization monopoly over defensive training, and concomitantly, the power to normalize guns and make them desirable tools for enacting citizenship among Americans, particularly downwardly-mobile white men (see Chapter 3 in Carlson 2015).

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realized then why Sam had been underwhelmed by Soldiers' online training: "I learned nothing new," he had told me earlier.

The plan for the day was to fix some Soldiers' equipment; "as reward" (in Ben's words), the men hoped to go target shooting at a nearby gun club. The Soldiers used a solar-powered, night-vision-enabled, motion-activated camera system to monitor "activity" on land belonging to a sympathetic rancher whose property abutted the international boundary. Exposed to the elements, the cameras frequently broke down, as one had recently. One of the group's vehicles, a 1993 Chevrolet Suburban painted in desert camouflage colors, also needed some work.

Phantom, a 72-year-old white man, replaced a fan blower motor and some lights, while Ben and Sam installed new USB charger ports. As the men worked, I learned that Phantom had spent ten years in the service during the Vietnam War era. Later, he worked in the Forest Service. Phantom had joined the Minutemen when they first formed in 2005. His only other organizational affiliation was with the far-right Oath Keepers, an organization that had been founded three years earlier, in 2009, to "defend" the U.S. Constitution – particularly the right to bear arms.

At one point in the day, Sam complimented Ben on his shirt, which was emblazoned with the Arizona Civil Defense League's (AzCDL) logo. The same emblem adorned various paraphernalia in Sam's workshop. AzCDL was a state-level gun rights group that had formed six years earlier, quickly growing its membership by becoming a fixture at gun shows. "Lots of the guys are members," Ben said. "Whenever a good bill passes or a bad bill is blocked, it's because of them. The NRA [National Rifle Association] tries to take the credit, but really they're way too willing to compromise. AzCDL is tough."

According to Ben, the organization's most impressive accomplishment came the previous year when it helped eliminate permit and safety training requirements for carrying a concealed weapon. As a result, Arizona joined Vermont and Alaska as the only other "constitutional carry" states in the nation. In subsequent years, gun lovers consistently ranked Arizona as the most "gun-friendly" place in the United States (Tarr 2013; Wood 2021). Over time, I learned that Ben wanted to start an online gun retail business with his friend. They hoped to sell the full range of guns and firearm accessories—magazines, scopes, tactical gear, grips, sights, triggers, ergonomic hand guards. The target customer would be people like Ben and Sam—who not only liked guns but also enjoyed customizing them. Ideally, Ben explained, the online business would also be a way to recruit new members for the Soldiers.

By the time the men had wrapped up the vehicle and camera repairs, it was nearing five o'clock. Much to everyone's frustration, it was too late to go shooting, so everybody parted ways.

Two weeks later, I went with Sam, Ben, Phantom, and Donald, an out of town "hunting buddy" of Sam's, on a "mission" in the desert near the Arizona-Sonora boundary. The Soldiers wanted to reinstall the camera they had fixed. While Ben and Donald tried to set up the camera in the brush, Sam "pulled security" from the top, concentrating on the area to the south, in the direction of Mexico. After about 20 minutes, Ben decided that the camera was, in fact, still broken. He would take it home and see what he could do.

Despite the failed mission, the group's spirits remained high. Ben suggested that the men should at least conduct recon. It was "finally the fun part," Sam exclaimed, beaming ear to ear. Sam, Donald, and I got back into Sam's truck, while Ben followed in the Soldiers' camouflaged Suburban, heading southwest. We found a spot where the men got ready to do tactical weapons exercises. They had all brought highly customized AR-15s with them. Donald, a former Army infantryman, had also brought over 1,000 rounds, which he kept offering to share. He had preemptively purchased "a fuck-ton" of ammo, fearing that Obama would be re-elected. "We all have, Donald," Ben stated. The men set up targets to practice "contact drills." They walked in a line, firearms in the ready position, until somebody announced, "Contact left!" Everybody then knelt down and shot at the targets. In sequence, one of the men announced, "Moving!" while the others provided suppressive fire as they advanced toward the targets. Sam and Ben had also brought their handguns, so they practiced transitioning quickly from pistol to rifle and back again.

Eventually, Donald realized that they should probably be practicing retreat drills instead. Contact drills were intended for advancing on armed persons. However, the Soldiers' protocol was to use firearms strictly for self-defense, and if need be, to defend another team member or "other innocent

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person(s).” Indeed, according to the group’s Standard Operating Procedures, the Soldiers should actively avoid any situation that could escalate into violence by “leav[ing] the area.” “Remember,” the document warned, “our mission is to observe and report, nothing else.” Ben, the highest-ranking Guardsman in the group, was visibly caught off-guard by Donald’s observation, but quickly conceded to his colleague’s logic. After doing a few drills retreating under cover fire—a self-defense simulation—the group decided to call it a day. We spent another half hour picking up the hundreds of spent cartridges so that Ben and Sam could reload them at home. Inspecting the targets, Ben whistled, saying, “Wow, we sure laid down some hate.”

As this section has illustrated, gun-centered spaces brought new members into the organization, while a shared culture of gun enthusiasm ensured their continued participation. The organization addressed the problem of frustratingly infrequent migrant encounters by centering its identity and activities around firearms. New members were expected to be gunowners and well-versed in firearm use. This ensured that, from the get-go, members had a common skillset and shared disposition. Ben was thus able to ensure that Soldiers showed up for desert patrols as well as, for example, less thrilling vehicle repair sessions.

Soldiers 2.0: Armed Camaraderie on the Border

When I returned to Arizona in early 2017, Donald Trump was firmly installed in the Oval Office, but the Soldiers were only cautiously optimistic about the new president’s promises to build a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border. During a muster in the desert, Curtis, a white man in his mid-50s, explained to me that he liked the president’s qualifications: a businessman who, as luck would have it, was in the building trade. If anyone could actually *build* a wall, Curtis declared, it was Trump. But “politicians are politicians,” he added. While a wall would send the “right message” to the world, Curtis doubted its on-the-ground effectiveness. Would it slow down professional drug-smuggling organizations? Not likely. Drug cartels employed athletes, Curtis explained solemnly, “beasts of men” who could easily shimmy up tall fence posts. He had heard about how easy it was for such people to use screwdrivers as pitons, driving them into the gaps of a metal grate fence and using them as anchors to climb over it. Building a wall was certainly a step in the right direction, but its value was more symbolic than material.

Tommy nodded in agreement. He had pulled up a camp chair near us, underneath the precious shade of the “comms tent” where Curtis was manning the radio and chatting with me. He carefully leaned his AR-15 against the table. Tommy flung his dog-eared notebook on the table and relaxed back in his chair. The notebook was filled with the cyphers from the radio chatter that the Soldiers had begun intercepting. The chatter, the Soldiers maintained, was between scouts, stationed on high vantage locations and the guides in the valleys who were leading migrants and carrying contraband. As he mapped out the foe’s organizational architecture, however, Tommy grew increasingly skeptical about what the Soldiers could accomplish, even with lots of volunteers.

Earlier, Rick, the Soldiers’ leader, had explained to me how he had to constantly remind his men of the significance of what they were doing. To have any modicum of success, the Soldiers had to remain constantly vigilant. Maintaining this level of discipline was challenging, however, especially when the order Rick most often gave participants was “hurry up and wait.” Monotony characterized most of the group’s activities. Attending to the radio chatter through the long night, for instance, had been Tommy’s task. Quietly crouching in the bush for 48 hours, no matter the weather, to surveil a spot along a migrant trail had been Curtis’s assignment. Rick knew that monotony (and with it, a sense of defeat) threatened to undermine the discipline he wanted the Soldiers to have.

The camaraderie fostered by “policing together” (Klinenberg 2001) was the antidote to the feelings of boredom, overwhelm, and disenchantment that threatened otherwise to overtake the group. The story of Curtis and Tommy’s friendship illustrates how this camaraderie—and its armed nature—sustained the men’s continued participation in anti-immigration activism.

The men had become friends after completing a two-day-long stakeout together earlier in the year. As a Mexican American, Tommy was one of the few Soldiers of color. Like most of his white counterparts, however, Tommy was a veteran, a former Marine who, at one point, proudly showed me the

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"semper fidelis" tattoo emblazoned across his chest that he himself had designed.[9] Tommy looked forward to retiring from his job as a correctional officer in a California state prison and opening a tattoo parlor. In many respects, Curtis was the opposite of Tommy. A white man in his mid-50s, Curtis was a ceramic tile contractor, running a boutique company with his brother. As someone with no military or law enforcement background, Curtis was in the minority among the Soldiers. With his Bachelor of Science degree from an elite university and his generally bookish manner—he brought Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* with him as pleasure reading—Curtis stood out among his working-class colleagues. He found tattoos abhorrent ("just the idea of getting one gives me hives," he groused), while Tommy admitted that the only book he thought worth reading was the Bible. Yet, the two men quickly developed a strong bond, as Tommy showed Curtis how to handle his firearms.

Curtis had become interested in firearms relatively recently when a friend had encouraged him to come to a shooting range. It was by regularly meeting up with a group of men there that he learned about the Soldiers. Although he was not particularly interested in immigration politics, Curtis wanted to "try out" his new firearms and grew intrigued by what the Soldiers were doing in Arizona. It was not long before he applied to volunteer with the group.

Curtis confessed that during the initial days of the op he had had a hard time acclimating. He considered curtailing his trip to return to California early. Conditions at the Soldiers' camp were rougher than he had anticipated. He suffered heat exhaustion. The ready-to-eat meals that he had been excited to consume ended up giving him indigestion. Sleeping on the uneven ground triggered his sciatica. The worst part of the whole experience, however, was how alienated Curtis felt among his fellow volunteers. The other Soldiers had teased Curtis about the newness of his rifle and his inexperience with firearms, suggesting that if he ever wanted to sell it, an appropriate yard sale sign would read "only dropped once, never been used."

Curtis was assigned to do a stakeout with Tommy. Curtis and Tommy did not observe any "activity" during their two days of surveillance. However, the shared experience fostered a friendship between them. Over the following week, Tommy gave Curtis firearm tips, while patiently listening to his new friend explain the basics of astronomy under the star-studded night sky. A humorous storyteller, Curtis also entertained Tommy with tales of his adventures. I frequently heard Tommy's hearty laughter soon after he began chatting with Curtis.

Most significantly, the men bonded over the fact that they were both gun enthusiasts and semiautomatic rifle owners in California, a state that strictly regulates firearm ownership (Carlson 2020). The state's landmark assault weapons ban, the 1990 Roberti-Roos Assault Weapons Control Act, prohibited features—such as large-capacity magazines—that, according to lawmakers, make a rifle more likely to be used for offensive rather than defensive shooting (California Department of Justice 2000). These prohibitions make it challenging, but not impossible, for Californians to own AR-15-style rifles (Carlson 2020). Because of its modular design, the components of an AR-15-style rifle can be swapped out. Thus, gun owners can modify their rifles to avoid the specific features that, according to California law, make a firearm an assault weapon, and, therefore, illegal (Bhattacharyya 2021). I witnessed Tommy and Curtis repeatedly sharing their frustration about the minutiae of California gun restrictions, often discussing the topic for hours.

In response to these prohibitions, gun manufacturers have created California-compliant parts, supplying Golden State firearms owners with many workarounds. However, the resulting "featureless" long guns were reviled among gun enthusiasts like the Soldiers, who often referred to California-compliant AR-15 style rifles as "castrated" or "neutered." Within this gendered logic, Arizona offered Californian Soldiers a chance to "feel like men" again.[10] However, this gendered framework also

[9] As Richard Dyer (2017) explains, whiteness is an unstable, relational social category with unclear boundaries. This vagueness means that different groups can identify with whiteness to varying degrees. Although he did not identify as white-Anglo, Tommy's gender, veteran status, law enforcement career, and socialization in the United States afforded him varying levels of whiteness, enabling him to find common ground with other Soldiers. Tommy also relied on these so-called "white" characteristics to draw stark boundaries between himself and racialized border crossers. For a detailed analysis of how Tommy reconciled his identity with the Soldiers' anti-Mexican racism, often downplaying any experiences of marginalization in the group, see Elcioglu 2020: pp. 91–95, 144–47, and 229–30. See also Vega (2014) for a discussion of how restrictionist Mexican Americans can justify their exclusionary racial politics by positioning themselves as "Latino, but American."

[10] Johnson's (2021) ethnographic fieldwork with a California-based Minutemen group also revealed similar themes—including talk between participants about differences in firearms legislation between Arizona and California, as well as the masculine norms that armed participation bolstered (see p. 136).

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threatened to alienate and drive out Soldiers who were gun novices—like Curtis. And, with me there (the only woman and non-armed person in the group), the gendered stakes of performing armed masculinity "properly" seemed even higher.

With the other men within earshot, Curtis began explaining to me how "stupid" California prohibitions were. Normally, a rifle would have a grip that allowed it to be held like a pistol, he said. But because California forbade this feature, one had to purchase a removable fin, or a piece of plastic that prevented the thumb from wrapping around the grip. To demonstrate what he believed was an absurd ban, Curtis attached the fin to the rifle's pistol grip: "Legal [in California]," he declared. He wanted to show me how easily the same gun suddenly became illegal under California's gun code when he slipped the fin off. However, the fin would not budge. The protracted struggle drew guffaws from the other Soldiers. When he finally detached the fin, Curtis proclaimed, "And now, [this gun is] illegal [in California]." Though eventually triumphant, he looked annoyed and embarrassed. Later, I overheard Tommy recommending an alternative manufacturer of California-compliant parts while also encouraging Curtis's continued participation. Curtis showed his gratitude by leaving his copy of *A Brief History of Time* with Tommy, who promised to at least struggle through the book's first chapter.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Guns were critical to Curtis's journey into anti-immigration activism in 2017, just as they had been for Sam six years earlier. Sam discovered the Soldiers at an Arizona gun show, while Curtis learned about the group's existence in a California shooting range. Sam was an avid firearms collector, a self-taught gunsmith, and a hunter. Curtis, meanwhile, was a novice, having purchased his first firearm only a few months before venturing into the Arizona borderlands.

Despite these differences, however, the men's initial experiences with the Soldiers highlighted the significance of guns to this form of political involvement. Sam's initiation into the group required that he review the Soldiers' online modules, which, by prioritizing gun-related protocols in "search-and-rescue" operations over everything else (including basic first aid knowledge), immediately signaled to initiates the importance of firearms to anti-immigration activism. Meanwhile, a gun rookie like Curtis felt so alienated among his gun-toting comrades—many of whom had learned how to handle firearms in institutional settings, such as the military and law enforcement—that he would have quit were it not for Tommy's intervention.

The "culture of armed citizenship" (Yamane 2017:6), built on American masculinity norms (Carlson 2015), made policing together (Klinenberg 2001) a meaningful and enjoyable activity for participants. Importantly, the centering of guns in anti-immigrant activism mitigated the monotony, boredom, and sense of defeat that threatened the Soldiers' organizational survival. For example, Sam bemoaned the absence of "activity" where they patrolled in 2011, and Tommy was overwhelmed by the scale of the drug organization they battled in 2017. In both moments, however, guns anchored everyday activities, giving the group its purpose and cohesion. Sam was attracted to the thrill of discharging his weapons, as when I observed him and fellow Soldiers doing drills in the desert in 2011. He even tolerated mundane group activities, such as doing maintenance work on the Soldiers' vehicle, when gun-centered activities were promised as reward. Similarly, the masculine camaraderie and friendships that guns facilitated allowed Tommy to set his boredom and doubts aside and keep participating.

Under Donald Trump's presidency, armed rightwing protests became common occurrences. They culminated in the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, during which three-quarters of the insurrectionists believed that elected leaders were orchestrating white demographic decline through expansive immigration policy (Pape 2022). However, to attribute the insurrection exclusively to Trump-era politics would be shortsighted. Armed musters benefitted from "years of beta testing" long before Trump took office: Gun-toting American civilians had been assembling to detain migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border since the 1990s (Felbab-Brown 2021; Walker 2007). The desire to restrict immigration through armed civilian intervention is not a product of unhinged thinking among fringe groups. Rather, it is the American settler-colonial legacy that the insurrectionists intuited and that future research must take seriously.

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This study provides one approach—among many—to the immigration-guns nexus in American politics. It does so by focusing on how gun culture funnels people and energy into anti-immigrant mobilization. I identify two mechanisms by which this process occurs. First, gun shows and shooting ranges—institutional spaces where a politics of white male aggrievement and armed citizenship is validated—are important recruitment sites among anti-immigrant groups. Second, the thrill of handling firearms mitigates the monotony and sense of futility that accompanies everyday anti-immigrant activism. It is in these pleasurable moments of gun-centered activities that participants get to know each other, build friendships, and strengthen the group's cohesiveness. Guns ensure future participation.

Thus, guns have political repercussions beyond just the narrow confines of the so-called "gun debate"—an argument that a prominent sociologist of guns has frequently advanced (Carlson 2015, 2020). In the current study, the Soldiers' organizational inception and survival seem unlikely in the absence of contemporary American gun culture.

Future studies should inquire about other spaces where immigration politics gets tangled up with gun culture, policy, and activism. Are guns significant for nativist organizations in places other than the U.S.-Mexico border? Do guns also contribute to the marginalization of other racialized groups? For instance, scholars increasingly identify the salience of Islamophobia in shaping the experiences of Muslim and Muslim-seeming Americans in the United States (Maghbouleh 2017; Shams 2020). To what extent and in what ways do guns reinforce and sustain Islamophobic ideas and practices among Americans?

Migration scholars should also be attentive to changing trends in gun purchases. A surge in first-time gun ownership pushed firearms purchases to unprecedented records in 2020 and 2021 (FBI 2022), with the biggest increase in gun buying occurring among women and people of color (Nieves and Waldrop 2021), groups that conventionally support Democratic candidates and favor immigrant rights. Migration scholars should explore the consequences of these trends and be attuned to the possibility that gun ownership may pull traditionally pro-immigrant Americans to the right. Researchers should, however, also be open to the possibility that pro-gun and nativist politics do not necessarily have to align. As gun ownership becomes more demographically inclusive, and political struggles grow more polarized, gun culture is being incorporated into anti-white supremacist political projects as well (Kelly 2019). Thus, the relationship of guns to immigration politics should not be essentialized but rather treated as an object of empirical inquiry.

In a related matter, the *absence* of the immigration-guns nexus, particularly in other settler-colonial societies, is also a topic that merits examination. In Canada, political conservatism draws strength from xenophobia and moral panics about the racialized Other. However, this white supremacist politics exists without the attendant obsession with gun rights. Comparing the United States and Canada, two settler-colonial societies that engaged in nation-making with stolen land, enslaved labor, and racially discriminatory immigration policy (Coulthard 2014; Dunbar-Ortiz 2021; Fitzgerald and Cook-Martin 2014; Maynard 2017), may yield important insights about the genesis of the immigration-guns nexus.

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