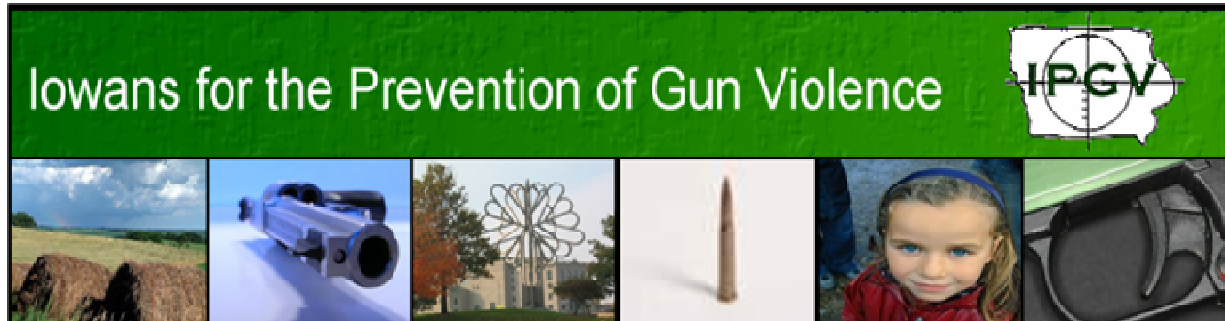


Campaign Profile, Interview with John Johnson, Executive Director, Iowans for the Prevention of Gun Violence on the Campaign to Close the Newspaper Loophole.



In March 2007, Cho Seung-Hui, a Virginia Technical University student, walked into a gun store in Roanoke, VA., and paid \$571 for a Glock 9-millimeter handgun and a box of ammunition. A few weeks earlier he had purchased a Walther .22-caliber semiautomatic pistol at a pawnshop. On April 16th, the student used these weapons to kill 32 people and then himself, leaving the highest death toll of any such shooting episode in U.S. history.

The massacre in Blacksburg, Virginia, again focused media and public attention on the practices of the U.S. gun industry and its allies. One continuing issue has been the retail practices of gun sellers and the degree to which the gun industry monitors the sales of its products. In this report, we excerpt an interview, conducted in August 2006 (before the Virginia shooting) by Corporate Health Watch staff member Sarah Bradley with John Johnson, Executive Director of [Iowans for the Prevention of Gun Violence](#), a founder of the national [Campaign to Close the Newspaper Gun Loophole](#). This Campaign seeks to persuade newspapers around the country to refuse gun advertisements from unlicensed dealers.

CHW: Gun control advocates have used several strategies to restrict access to lethal weapons and reduce the harm from gun violence. What made you decide to focus on newspaper advertising of guns? After all, newspaper ads aren't the biggest source of guns, are they?

JJ: No, newspapers are probably not the biggest source of guns. And we can see that, yes, there are probably more sales through gun shows and the internet, but the reason we focused on newspapers — I think this is important — is that it doesn't require legislation. To close the "internet loophole" would require legislation. Closing the newspaper loophole doesn't take an act of Congress. All it takes is a management decision. And gun ads are probably a very small source of the total income for the newspaper. That's another factor that helps. Whereas if you went to people who do internet sales that's their whole business. So you're trying to get them to change their whole business. When we go to newspapers, we're trying to get them just to change a tiny part of their business. So that's why we focused on newspapers. Not that they're the biggest source, but it's an area where we thought we could have some success, and we have had some success. This sends an important message when newspaper publishers do make a change.

CHW: Well, this brings me to a question about the relationship between industry, government, and these campaigns. Some advocates argue that it's easier to change a corporation or a business policy than it is to change a government policy, particularly in our current political climate. What do you think?

JJ: At this point, we have a very pro-gun Congress, and a President who is willing to sign a [pro-gun industry] bill, and for the last six years now there's been this erosion of the few gun laws that we actually had. So Congress allowed the assault weapons ban to expire when it needed to be strengthened. After ten years, it wasn't working as intended. And when a law isn't working as intended, the proper response is not to throw it away, but to strengthen it and make it work. Then Congress passed this legislation that gave the gun industry immunity from civil lawsuits — it's just very discouraging.

As a small group with two and a half staff and not a lot of money, the Campaign to Close the Newspaper Loophole made a decision not to focus on state and federal legislation, but to work on what we called non-legislative initiatives. When we get a newspaper to change, to us that means, "Okay, that'll be 100 gun ads that won't be sold through the newspaper this year." We look at it as more than just the 100 guns that won't be sold through the newspaper. We look at it as here's a business that has made a responsible decision on the way they conduct their policies. The Campaign to Close Newspaper Loopholes shows that these businesses recognize the concern and have taken appropriate action, setting a good example for other newspapers and other businesses.

As I said before, I think the legislative strategy can change with the legislature. Right now, the legislatures are not friendly, throughout. And, therefore, I'd say at this point, it's just a pragmatic decision. We just don't think we could accomplish anything legislatively. You know that could change. We hope it will change. To pass a law in Iowa with the legislature, I have to get 100 people to vote. And they're worried that if they vote this way, they'll lose their job or something like that. Whereas to get 30 newspapers to change, all I have to do is go to 30 newspapers. So in my mind, it's just a pragmatic decision. To use a football analogy, you "take what the defense gives you." You know if they put ten men on the line of scrimmage, then you're going to have to pass. Whereas, if they drop everybody off the line to cover the pass, then you need to run. So the strategy to go to the publisher is really an opportunity that we see is out there. These other opportunities don't seem to be as realistic.

CHW: Can you give me some examples of how you approach newspaper publishers? What do you say and how do the publishers respond?

JJ: During the summer of 2002, I learned about a series of articles in the *Detroit Free Press* about the high number of homicides among teenagers in the city, mostly from firearms. From our previous survey, we knew this was a newspaper that took classified ads for all guns...shotguns, even hand guns from unlicensed dealers. Since the *Detroit Free Press* is a progressive newspaper in a large metropolitan city that generally has higher rates of crime than smaller cities and rural areas, and a paper that brought this issue to the attention of their readers, we thought it was a good candidate to change their policies. We always felt that the reason newspapers took gun ads was because they just hadn't given it a lot of thought.

I contacted the President of the Detroit [Million Mom March](#) chapter. They're a gun control organization, part of the [Brady Campaign](#). And I explained to her about what our campaign to close the newspaper loophole was, asking newspapers to voluntarily refuse classified ads for guns, and to see if she would work with me to try to bring this issue to the attention of the management of the newspaper. She agreed to do that, and more than that, she put together a coalition of local activists

Ms. Hamilton sent a letter to the publisher of the Detroit Free Press, making the case for closing the loophole and asking for a meeting. We had a meeting with the management of the newspaper where all these local organizations went in and made the case. The next day the paper called up and said they're going to change their policy.

CHW: That's a great story — is it always that easy?

JJ: Another example comes from Florida, the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*. You couldn't ask for an example that better shows the danger from these ads. A man was involved in a contentious divorce and child custody dispute with his spouse, purchased a semi-automatic hand gun from an unlicensed seller through a classified ad in the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*. On the same day that he bought the gun, which was a Sunday morning, he went to the home where his estranged wife was living and shot and killed her in front of their nine-year old daughter.

What made this incident interesting for us was that the murder was recorded in the newspaper; but the newspaper story never really reported how he got his gun. A person in Sarasota, Florida, read in the newspaper that after the shooting, the police executed a search warrant of the man's house where they recovered newspaper ads and a gun receipt. But the article never said that he bought the gun from an ad in our newspaper. So this person in Sarasota sent me an email saying we might be interested in this. So we started working on this on our own. We called the sheriff's office to see if they would give us information, and they said, "Well, the guy's busy" and it was kind of a difficult. We looked at some court records online, and we were able to find out that the person who sold the gun was a man named John Spearman. We tried to find him through Internet searches and telephone books but that didn't work. But I happen to have a cousin who lives in Bradenton, Florida, where this shooting happened. And I called her and said, "You know we think that somebody bought a gun through an ad in a local newspaper" and I asked her to go to the library and make copies of the ads for that weekend. I figured if he bought the gun it was probably an ad that weekend. So my cousin went to the library and sent me ads from the two local papers and we also finally got a hold of the Sherriff's office, and they told us what kind of a gun was used; and we were able to match them up and confirmed that it was an ad from the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*. So I called this John Spearman and asked him if he sold the gun to the shooter. And he said, "Yea, I did. And you know what? That stupid idiot went and shot and killed somebody with it."

So then we wrote a letter to the Editor/Publisher of the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*. We said, "An ad in your newspaper was the source of this gun," and we made the request to close this loophole. We also wrote letters to about twenty other newspapers in Florida saying "An ad in the *Sarasota Herald Tribune* was the source of the gun used in a murder. You ought to consider

changing your policies.” After sending that letter we started calling editors and set a date for a press conference. We were going to hold a press conference to increase public awareness of this concern. And when we called the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, they said, “We have decided to change our policy.” In fact, they ran a front page story before our press conference telling their readers that they were changing their policy.

CHW: Did you get any other papers in Florida?

JJ: Yes, we got four or five other Florida newspapers out of those twenty.

CHW: I noticed that over the years your campaign changed its focus from asking newspapers to end all advertising for guns to asking them just to drop classified advertisements by unlicensed gun dealers. Can you explain that change?

JJ: Originally we did ask people just not to take ads for guns. Then we discovered a few newspapers that actually had the restrictive policy of taking ads from licensed dealers only. And we thought that was a better position to adopt. And so since we started our 50 state campaign—to reach newspapers all around the country—our position has been to ask publishers not to take classified ads for guns from unlicensed sellers.

We thought this approach would have broader appeal for a couple of reasons. One, I think it’s an easier position for us to argue. We come across less as anti-gun. And I’ve always felt it’s an easier position to advocate. Second, newspapers find it easier for them to implement. They could say, “Well, we have nothing against guns. It just that we’re concerned about the way they’re sold.” However, when the *Sarasota Herald Tribune* changed their policy, it was just “We won’t take ads for guns, period.” That’s even better.

CHW: Do a lot of licensed dealers advertise in newspaper classifieds?

JJ: No. Licensed dealers don’t typically advertise in the classifieds. They run retail ads. So by taking this position, not only is it an easier sell but it virtually eliminates all classified gun ads. I think it’s easier to frame the issue. And it’s a much more definitive issue. If a newspaper says “I’m not taking ads for guns”, then they’ve made a moral decision to not take ads for guns. But most people in business don’t want to be against guns because they want business from gun people.

CHW: So what do you think makes it so hard to make progress on developing stricter gun control laws?

JJ: To me, what makes this issue so hard is that everybody is against gun violence. I don’t think anybody is advocating for more violence. Even your most right wing NRA is not advocating for violence. We all agree we would like to have fewer gun deaths and injuries. But where we disagree is “How do you get there?” We have policies we support like a ban on assault weapons and background checks on gun purchases. But there are people in the NRA who believe the way to have lower gun violence is to have everybody carry a gun, and then we’d all

be safer because criminals wouldn't dare rob a store because everybody in the store would be armed even though there's not much empirical evidence for that kind of perspective.

On this issue, I've always tried to be fact-based. So look at the policy. Is there any reasoned analysis, data or studies that would indicate that it would work? The NRA and other people, they just have things that sound good to them. You know, "more guns, less crime." It's been so hard to counter these arguments that have no factual basis.