

Interview with Kristin Rand of the Violence Policy Center.

Kristen Rand is legislative director for the [Violence Policy Center](#) (VPC). Ms. Rand is responsible for the VPC's policy-maker education efforts and directs the organization's research on federal firearms policy. Ms. Rand is the author of *Gun Shows in America: Tupperware Parties for Criminals* and the 1995 study, *Lawyers, Guns and Money: The Impact of Tort Restrictions on Firearms Safety and Gun Control*. She is co-author of the Violence Policy Center study *Cease Fire: A Comprehensive Strategy to Reduce Firearms Violence*, which was excerpted in *Rolling Stone* magazine. Ms. Rand's writings on the Second Amendment have appeared in various publications including the *Bill of Rights Journal* and the book *NRA: Money, Firepower and Fear*.

In November 2007, Corporations and Health Watch spoke with Ms. Rand about the changing relations between NRA, the gun industry and gun owners, declining gun ownership rates, and gun control advocacy in current political climate.

CHW: Let's begin with an update on current federal legislation on firearms and gun reform, specifically the Tiahrt Amendment and the national instant background check system bill [["NICS Improvement Act"](#)]. What can you tell me about where things stand with this legislation, how the industry and the gun lobby have responded, and what action the VPC is taking on them?

KR: Well, the so-called [Tiahrt Amendment](#) prevents the federal Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms from releasing information contained in their crime gun trace database--a tremendous resource for information on the types of gun that are most commonly traced to crime. It's very valuable information that used to be readily available to the public through the Freedom of Information Act that the gun lobby has closed access to, except in very limited circumstances for law enforcement. The Tiahrt amendment, on its face may not appear to have that much to do with the industry, but in fact its main goal is to prevent trace database information from being used in lawsuits. The industry is just fanatical about preventing that information from being used in a civil context and the NRA has taken the lead in promoting the Tiahrt amendment. The other aspect of Tiahrt that's helpful to the industry is hiding the information about which guns are most commonly used in crime, how often, what weapons are used in crime, because that helps drive policy initiatives that focus on particular weapon-types. The industry is very interested in keeping that a secret as well. So we're working in a big coalition of gun violence prevention oriented organizations to repeal that. There's still a lot of haggling over Tiahrt and we think unfortunately some form of it will remain. But the good news is that because of the spotlight that this legislative battle has put on this issue, ATF has actually begun to more freely release some of the information in the context of state by state reports of aggregate trace data. So we have access to some information even though ultimately ATF should not have been able to release that under the terms of Tiahrt but they did. Even though we haven't really gotten rid of the amendment, we have made some headway in forcing some of the information into the public domain. But how it will end up legislatively at this point is still unclear. It's probably highly unlikely to pass this session, but its hard to predict what will happen next year.



Another VPC top priority is stopping [a bill that purports to improve the national instant criminal background check system](#) but contains provisions that were inserted by the NRA that would require the federal government to restore gun privileges to tens of thousands of individuals, primarily veterans, with serious mental health disabilities and requires states to do the same thing at the state level. We are extremely concerned based on the prior history of a Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives program that restored gun privileges to felons but had a very poor track record of recidivism. We think on balance that

that bill is actually a real threat to public safety so we are making a priority of preventing that from becoming law.

CHW: I find it interesting that while the VPC is taking a strong stand against this bill, the Brady Campaign is supporting it. What can you tell me about this difference in viewpoint?

KR: The bill does authorize funding for federal grants to states to improve their background check system, but you have to keep in mind that an authorization is not an appropriation so the money is not guaranteed. Having, theoretically, some money available to the states to improve their background check system, is enough to gain the Brady Campaign's support. Our view is that that piece of it is entirely speculative; it's very doubtful that it would ever be funded and then when you add in this really dangerous other, on balance the bill has far more bad in it than good.

CHW: The NRA is also supporting this instant background check bill. Is their sponsorship reflective of the larger gun industry's position?

KR: The NRA has recently really become primarily a lobbying arm of the industry. Most of their major priorities in the past few years have been far more oriented towards benefiting the industry than the gun owner. And the industry is very interested in having the next bill pass because right now there are tens of thousands of veterans who cannot buy firearms because they have this mental health disability. The number of people who own guns is shrinking fairly dramatically and veterans are a huge portion of the people who still buy guns. I don't have any direct knowledge that the NRA has coordinated with the industry on this but I'm sure the industry wants to see these relief provisions go back because those people are people who are clearly going to go out and buy guns.



CHW: How have the VPC's tactics changed in response to the fact that the gun industry and gun lobbies have found favor in the current administration?

KR: When we first started we had a much more aggressive agenda at the federal level; Congress was more open to the issue and it was a lot easier to accomplish things at the federal level simply by exposing problems through research. For example, we did a study in the early 90s looking at the lack of regulation of gun dealers and that resulted in a lot of media attention, attention from congress and resulted in real change. You can't really operate that way anymore because of changes in congress, a much faster news cycle, and also the fact that the NRA has just done this tremendous job of perpetuating this, for the most part, myth, that they can defeat candidates at will, when if you really look at their track record, some of the candidates that they supported lost and ones they went after did fine. We thought there would be more of a change in attitude when the Democrats took control of Congress but even a Democratic leadership has bought into this idea that the gun issue is bad for a lot of their more rural members so they don't want to get near it either. So you have to give the NRA credit, they're very good at taking credit and scaring people. It's made it much harder to get proactive things moving at the federal level, so we're much more on the defensive.

So the VPC has put a lot more focus on our state-based research projects. One example being a study we started doing seven or eight years ago looking at the number of women who are homicide victims. We looked at FBI supplementary homicide data to debunk the gun lobby's spin that women's risk of homicide is greatest from strangers. In reality, most women who are murdered are murdered by someone they know, most often by an intimate partner. So we put out that message and then we ranked the states, in terms of homicide rates for women, and found out that it had tremendous impact at the state level in the states that ranked high. And so we kept doing that every year and it's resulted in real change and it's become a real tool for local domestic violence advocates. We started doing a similar study ranking black homicide rates which

had a very important impact in Pennsylvania last year which ranked number one. The information was used by local advocates and civil rights groups and the governor cited it in his “state of the state” address. So we started doing a lot more things that help to change attitudes and raise awareness at the state level because we’re so much on the defensive at the federal level.

CHW: What impact do you think the [Mayors' Coalition](#) has had at the state and national levels?

KR: I think the Mayors' Coalition had a very positive impact and one of the outcomes has been to make members of congress from jurisdictions where the mayors have been outspoken focus more on the issue. The problem of gun violence has become much more acute for the last three years and the mayors [were] the first to feel it and they're starting to articulate that. Because it is getting so bad in some cities, like Philadelphia, where they're preempted from acting because of state law, they can't do anything and the mayor is very frustrated. With rising homicide rates and illegal gun trafficking, they'll start hearing that message more and eventually it will force Congress to deal with this issue. So I think the Mayors' Coalition is an incredibly important development and will have more of an impact as the problems continue to get worse.

But going back three or four steps, the Mayors' Coalition really is the catalyst for forcing a lot of the information that ATF has had to release from their trace database in the context of the debate over the Tiahrt amendment. The Mayors were pivotal in defeating some legislation that the NRA was pushing last Congress, while the Republicans were still in control, to weaken ATF's authority to regulate gun dealers. So even though this coalition hasn't existed that long, they've already had some real concrete positive impact and I think down the road you'll see them have a lot more.

CHW: What impact do you believe the NRA and the gun industry will have on the 2008 Presidential Election?

KR: I don't think the NRA is going to have that much of an impact. They've got a big problem with who the Republican nominee is going to be. The front-runners right now, Guliani and Romney, have very long track records of being pro-gun control and the NRA's grassroots membership will not accept someone who has a strong track record of supporting gun control. There's also growing tension from the NRA's grassroots: they believe that the NRA has become too “inside the beltway,” that they're really just kind of a Washington interest group and they're not really representing the grassroots, but rather are more interested in representing the industry. And without their grassroots, their impact is very limited. I think that in this election cycle this problem of increasing gun violence increasing is going to have more impact on the swing voters and the NRA is going to be fairly neutralized.



CHW: If amongst the NRA's grassroots, there's the conception that the NRA is operating more in the service of the gun industry and less on behalf of individual gun owners, are there other organizations that are starting to spring up then to represent this population?

KR: Yes, there's a group called the [Gun Owners of America](#), which has actually been around for a long time and they have always been to the right of the NRA. They are somewhat effective on Capitol Hill, but what we're seeing is a lot of people saying “I've given up my NRA membership and I'm going to go join GOA because they're the ones that really represent the individual gun owner.” And every indication is the NRA has been losing members and I think a lot of them are going to GOA.

CHW: What's the relationship between Gun Owners of America and the gun lobby?

KR: I don't know of any existing relation between GOA and the industry. Their bread and butter is they call

themselves the only no-compromise gun lobby in Washington and their focus is opposing any and all restriction.

CHW: You mentioned the NRA is operating more like a lobby for the gun industry. Can you talk a little more about the relationship between the NRA and the gun industry? Specifically, do they tend to agree on most bills and policies?

KR: There was a big split between the NRA, the NRA's grassroots membership and the industry over a bill to limit the liability of gun manufacturers that passed a couple years ago. Supporters of gun-control were successful in attaching amendments that are pro-gun violence prevention, one to renew the federal assault weapons ban and one to close the so-called "gun show loophole," and the NRA continued to support the bill even though those amendments had been attached, as did the industry. They were trying to tell the individual gun owners "look, just let us pass this bill, and then we'll work to get the amendments off later." But the grassroots, egged on by Gun Owners of America, just rose up and they were successful in killing the bill. I think that was a real indication of how close the NRA and the industry have become because the NRA refused to stand with their grassroots; they stayed with the industry. Since then the NRA's priorities have all been industry-oriented and the NRA is far more effective on the Hill than the official industry trade organization which is the [National Shooting Sports Foundation](#). At the federal level there's just definitely more difference between the interests of the individual gun owner and the NRA versus the interests of the NRA and the industry.

CHW: As you mentioned, gun ownership is on the decline nationally. What are the causes of this decline and what are the gun lobby and the gun industry doing in response?

KR: Well I think the causes are multiple. Number one, there's a sort of general disinterest in the shooting sports and hunting, particularly among children. The U.S. Department of the Interior recently [put out a study](#) showing that the number of younger people hunting is really on the decline; kids are interested in video games and not in tromping around in the woods. Also, society's becoming more urban and suburban and there's really nowhere to hunt. There's a real growing understanding, particularly among women, of the hazards of bringing a gun into the home. When you have more households headed by single women, then you're going to have fewer households with guns. And gun ownership is somewhat of a regional cultural thing and so you see the most precipitous decline in the Northeast and where there's just not so much of a culture of gun ownership. So I think it's a variety of factors.

It's certainly a fact that the industry's trying to deal with and what they've been trying to do, not very successfully, is reach out to women and bring children into the shooting sports. We know that the numbers show that the number of women who own guns has remained stagnant over the last couple decades and if you look at the hunting numbers, a lot of those kids aren't getting into it either. Then they just try to use the scare tactics that "you really need a gun or someone's gonna break down your door and kill your family"---a lot of their marketing revolves around that sort of fear-mongering. Another problem that they have is that America is just becoming much more of a diverse country and the typical gun owner is a white male. They've made these kind of awkward entrées to try to reach out to African Americans and Latinos and that really has not been successful. So what they're really left with is trying to sell one more gun to someone who already owns four or five guns and that's what you'll also see in the gun ownership numbers: the number of the individuals who own guns is decreasing but those individuals are buying guns tend to own several guns already. That's really the market that's left---creating demand for those current owners to add one more gun to their existing arsenal.



CHW: Ok, to conclude, given the current political context, what role do you see public health advocates and researchers playing in advocacy efforts to reduce gun violence?

KR: Right now I think any victories are really going to be at the state level. At the federal level we're really just completely on the defensive right now. But I think one of the things that's helped over the last decade is having public health advocates talking about the hazards of guns and all the research that has been done by people like [David Hemenway](#) at Harvard's School of Public Health. Research establishing the relationship between gun density and gun death and making people understand that if you bring a gun into your home its much more likely that it will be used against a family member than to repel a criminal attack has helped move us forward and I think its a big piece of why more people are rejecting gun ownership. So I think in this context, the best thing that public health professionals can do is to continue to speak out, to educate the public and raise awareness about the problem.

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