

**Study Guide in Six Sessions for**

# **COLLATERAL DAMAGE**

**Changing the Conversation about Firearms and Faith**

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*Study guide prepared by Rev. Jan Orr-Harter for the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship*

**Note:** Small groups for this study could range from three to twelve persons. If you have more than twelve participants, divide into two groups. Each session will be about seventy-five minutes. Try to be at the middle question at about the midpoint of your time together. One person could lead each session, or you can rotate the leaders for each session, perhaps assigning members with different backgrounds, such as teachers, medical providers, law enforcement officers, parents, pastors, business owners, and so on.

The task of the leader for each session is to start and end the session, to ask the questions, and to keep the discussion moving forward, without any person dominating or others being left out. If members of the group express deep grief or pain during the conversation, take time to minister to that person. If a question gets bogged down, you can move on to the next one.

In each session you will need a marker and chart paper or a roll of paper; save these items after each session to use again.

## **SESSION 1: What Is Collateral Damage?**

*Read beforehand:* Chapters 1–2

**Leader:** Begin with self-introductions, asking each person to share, from their own life, the name and circumstances of one person whose life was ended or affected by gun violence. Take a moment of prayer to hold these names before God and to ask God's help for this group as you begin to study the impact of gun violence.

1. In chapter 1, James Atwood opens with three pages about the statistics of gun deaths and the number of guns in America. He then turns to the collateral damage not named in the statistics, speaking of “long-term victims” and gun violence as “a way of life.” This is a book about the ripple effects of violence and death. How do you feel about joining a group of fellow citizens engaging with such painful topics?

2. Take a few minutes to define “collateral damage” in your own words. On chart paper or a roll of paper, list the types of collateral damage that the author describes. Can you think of others?
3. On page 24, Atwood introduces a topic to which he returns throughout this book: the collateral damage of gun violence to America’s children and youth. Add to your list how gun violence directly and indirectly affects children and youth, both immediately and over time.
4. In chapter 2, Atwood identifies what he calls ten “myths” that capture our minds and turn our attention away from addressing our national epidemic of gun violence. Have any of these “myths” played a role in your own life? Do you agree with any of these ten statements? Why?
5. Have you changed your view on any of these statements? What caused you to change? Why are these “myths” so powerful in our culture?
6. On page 29, Atwood shares that “as a former hunter, I know that the love of hunting doesn’t preclude a commitment to common-sense gun legislation. . . . There is so much common ground.” He then turns to his understanding of the kingdom of God. What might be the relationship between this “common ground” and the kingdom of God on earth?

Close by standing together to offer the Lord’s Prayer.

*Read for the next session:* Chapters 3–4

## **SESSION 2: What Is Gundamentalism?**

*Read beforehand:* Chapters 3–4

*Supplies needed:* A marker and the list of collateral damage from session 1. As you move through these sessions, add any additional forms of collateral damage to the list.

**Leader:** Welcome all and open with prayer.

1. For those of us who own guns and those of us who do not, what are some of the actions that define a “responsible gun owner”? Has the National Rifle Association played a part in your family history? Were you aware of the NRA takeover in the 1970s?
2. Atwood states that a small fraction of gun owners can be described as “gundamentalists,” marked by a “religious devotion to guns.” How and why does this devotion to guns develop in the lives of this small group of Americans? Why is gundamentalism so opposed to any and all compromise, such as restricting gun purchases for those on the Transportation Security Administration’s “no fly” list, or finding any common ground?
3. On page 47, Atwood argues that “the Second Amendment belongs to all Americans.” He calls upon the “silent majority of gun owners” to mobilize for the necessary “well-regulated militia” that is stipulated by the Second Amendment. And then he asks on page 51, “Why are we so paralyzed?” Is it possible to enact change when the opponents of the change are all armed? Throughout history, can you identify any examples of such change? At what cost did change come?

4. On page 49, Atwood suggests that “stand your ground” laws are the result of gundamentalism, which essentially holds lawmakers hostage. To update the case described, a Florida jury convicted Michael Drejka of manslaughter in August 2019, despite his claim that he shot Markeis McGlockton in self-defense. Why do you think the jury did so? Has gundamentalism pushed too far in protecting guns over people? Is momentum building for a new approach?
5. Review the table on page 54. If you remove the post–Civil War states of Oklahoma, Alaska, and Hawaii, the states with the most guns and most gun deaths are all in what once was the Confederacy; the states with the fewest guns and fewest gun deaths are all in the former Union. How and why does the Civil War continue to affect our country with a type of collateral damage? Why is there such an increase over the last decade in white nationalist and other armed hate groups all across America? Do you see any signs of how we can get beyond this?
6. On pages 64–69, Atwood again challenges adults to wake up to the collateral damage of gun violence to children and youth, especially children and youth of color. What from these pages can you add to your list of collateral damage for children and youth? As individual adults and as a society, has gun violence wrought collateral damage to our capacity for parenting and protecting children?
7. Chapter 4 examines the collateral damage of gundamentalism to our entire society, including numbness, incivility, and fear. On pages 70–71, Atwood describes the fear that can keep us from speaking out to save lives. As the number of guns and the level of gun violence have increased, thanks to both mass shootings and the daily toll of murders, suicides, family violence, and accidents, how have you and your family adapted to or been changed by this violence? What collateral damage do you live with? Add these responses and any other additions to your list of collateral damage.

Close by offering a prayer for the children in your families and your church as they live with the reality of gun violence in schools and communities. Name the children before God.

*Read for the next session:* Chapters 5–6

### **SESSION 3: The Epidemic of Despair and the Folly of False Solutions**

*Read beforehand:* Chapters 5–6

*Supplies needed:* A marker and list of collateral damage. As you move through the session, add any additional forms of collateral damage to the list.

**Leader:** Welcome all and open with prayer.

1. Chapter 5 states that of the 180,000 to 190,000 Americans who are injured in a shooting each year, about 60,000 of them “suffer long-term depression or PTSD that lasts for years.” Others who are near shootings or who experience the loss of someone to gun violence add to this collateral damage of post-traumatic stress disorder—tens of thousands more each year. Have you or your family or friends experienced any type of PTSD? What has been its impact? What is the cumulative impact of the collateral damage of gun violence–related PTSD on our society year after year?
2. Suicide is the area where “gun sense” regulations can save the largest number of lives, but we are often uncomfortable talking about suicide. Why are we uncomfortable discussing suicide? What myths

surround our views of it? What do you know about the collateral damage of suicide for surviving family and friends? Why is keeping guns out of the hands of the distraught not a top priority for us?

3. On pages 83–84, Atwood tells of two mothers, one white and one Black, who both lost children to gun violence. Why do you think that gun deaths among white people are more likely to be suicides and gun deaths among African Americans are more likely to be homicides?
4. We all want to end mass shootings in our schools. Discuss the proposed solutions that Atwood suggests will not actually work and why. What are some solutions that could actually help? Do you think that parents and others should be prosecuted if a child or family member brings their gun to school or commits a shooting with their gun?
5. What is the long-term collateral damage of a generation of American children who can now purchase bulletproof backpacks, who are required to participate in school lockdowns, and who are afraid of being shot while at school? Has this affected your own family and friends? Does it suggest anything to add to your list of collateral damage?
6. Atwood challenges the gundamentalist strategy that “more guns in more places will make us safer” and that unarmed “soft targets” make us more vulnerable. Shootings have occurred in churches, but they also have occurred at the Fort Hood U.S. Army base (in 2009, a shooter killed thirteen and wounded over thirty; in 2014, a shooter killed four, including himself, and wounded at least twelve) and the Washington Navy Yard (in 2013, a shooter killed twelve and wounded four), both locations that were heavily armed with guns. Statistics show that where there are more guns, there is actually more gun violence. Do you feel safer in places of business or worship and other locations where guns are carried or safer where they are not allowed? Why?
7. Accidental gun deaths and injuries occur from misuse and misplacement of firearms, as well as from children finding a loaded gun in the home, a vehicle, a purse, or other locations. What are some steps that can reduce the fatal collateral damage of accidental gun violence? Why is keeping guns out of the hands of children not a top priority for us?

Close by standing together. As the leader offers prayer for those who are distraught and desperate, lift up these names, spoken or silently.

*Read for the next session:* Chapters 7–8

## **SESSION 4: Hard Topics to Talk About—Money, Gun Violence, Racism, and Poverty**

*Read beforehand:* Chapters 7–8

*Supplies needed:* A marker and list of collateral damage. As you move through the session, add any additional forms of collateral damage to the list.

**Leader:** Welcome all and open with prayer.

1. In addition to the human cost of lost lives, chapter 7 introduces a topic rarely discussed: the collateral economic damage of gun violence to survivors and their families, to businesses, to hospitals, to insurance companies, to the court system and law enforcement, and ultimately, to the taxpayer. The study on

page 107 cites this total cost as \$229 billion per year. What in this chapter surprised you the most? Why is our society willing to sustain these costs?

2. Do you agree or disagree with Atwood that the largest economic cost of gun violence, the criminal justice system, is not working effectively? Do you know of efforts in your city or state to use law enforcement and criminal justice dollars in more effective ways to help prevent gun violence in the first place?
3. Chapter 8 gives us an opportunity to talk together about the connections between gun violence, racism, and poverty. The author, an octogenarian white male southerner who is a former hunter, examines his own sense of “white supremacy” and encourages others to do so. For persons of color in the group, are you willing to share a message about the impact of white supremacy? For those who are white, what is the most difficult aspect of examining white supremacy for you?
4. On page 123, Atwood describes how in the 1970s the gun industry went from producing and marketing traditional hunting guns designed to kill game to producing and marketing handguns and military-style assault weapons designed to kill people. Discuss the context of this philosophical/ideological change by the gun industry. What is the relationship of 393 million guns in America with racial division today and poverty in urban areas?
5. On page 129, Atwood cites the words of theologian James Cone in his 2011 book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, that “nearly one-half of the more than two million people in prisons are black.” Do you agree or disagree that the long “War on Drugs” has viewed Black offenders as more likely to need incarceration and white offenders as more likely to need rehabilitation and treatment? Why do you think the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has repeatedly taken positions to warn our political leaders that for-profit prisons are not a good policy? What is the long-term collateral damage for America of depending on a for-profit prison industry?
6. On page 134, Atwood states that “60 percent of firearm homicides take place in the poorest neighborhoods of America’s largest cities.” How do you understand the relationship between poverty and gun violence? What can we do to break these cycles?
7. Do you agree or disagree that today, gun violence in predominantly white neighborhoods is more likely to be viewed as a public health or mental health issue, while gun violence in predominantly Black or poor neighborhoods is more likely to be viewed as a criminal, gang, or drug issue? How does this distinction affect the use of guns by police today? How does the gun lobby use this distinction to prevent passage of gun-sense laws? Is there anything else in this chapter that you wish to discuss or to add to the list of collateral damage?

Close by standing in prayer as the leader reads the words of the stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA), J. Herbert Nelson, on page 175: “We must get outside our church buildings . . .”

*Read for the next session:* Chapters 9–10

## **SESSION 5: Moving from Paralysis to Change**

*Read beforehand:* Chapters 9–10

*Supplies needed:* A Bible, marker, and list of collateral damage. As you move through the session, add any additional forms of collateral damage to the list.

**Leader:** Welcome all and open with prayer.

1. On page 142, Atwood writes, “People in the United States tend to think there are two kinds of violence: 1) the despicable violence of our adversaries, whether real or imagined, and 2) the redemptive violence we must be ready to use to defend our loved ones or our American values.” Use your own words to explain what Atwood and theologian Walter Wink mean by “the myth of redemptive violence.” What role does this myth play in the level of gun violence we are experiencing? What role does it play in the efforts of the corporate gun lobby to prevent change?
2. Chapter 9 outlines the extremely effective strategy of the gun lobby to end federal research on the causes of and solutions to gun violence, as well as to significantly disable the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. Why have these two strategies been so effective at preventing America from finding common ground to protect the rights of responsible gun owners and to save lives with gun-sense legislation?
3. Where the federal government has failed to act, in many states and municipalities, local elected officials of both political parties are beginning to work together to enact “red flag laws” and other steps to keep guns away from those who are dangerous to themselves or others. Why do you think these local politicians are more willing to stand up to the NRA than many politicians at the national level? Do you agree or disagree that the NRA has used financial contributions and threats to oppose candidates in order to control the federal government? Do you believe the corporate gun lobby should have that much power? What steps can we as citizens take to embolden our elected officials of both parties to take action to save lives at all levels of government?
4. Chapter 10 opens by identifying empathy, care, and compassion as the motivation of the church of Jesus in the work of preventing gun violence. By this, Atwood means compassion for the victims of gun violence and also for those who suffer from its collateral damage—medically, economically, emotionally, and in every other way. We are called to bear compassion for an entire nation in crisis. Atwood then offers at least *seventeen actionable ways* to put Christian compassion to work to prevent gun violence, including enacting new laws. As you read these many proposals, why, in your opinion, has our society accepted for so long that gun violence is inevitable? Who perpetuates the myth that there is not much we can do about it? With all of these options, as Atwood asked earlier in the book on page 51, “Why are we so paralyzed?”
5. Out of your own compassion, which two proposals or new laws speak most clearly to you and make the most sense to you? Are there any that you disagree with?
6. Looking at pages 166–68, if you sought to build an “honest partnership” about gun violence across racial and economic lines, how might you begin that process in your community?
7. Is anyone in the group already involved in working on steps like Atwood’s seventeen proposals? For instance, have you ever asked if guns in a home are stored safely before a play-date for children? Have you ever talked to family members or neighbors about gun violence? Have you reached out to elected officials? How did such actions make you feel? Empowered? Frightened? Why? What have you learned from this book and in this study group about Americans (and others) talking to each other about gun violence?

Close by standing as the leader reads John 5:2-6, which asks, “Do you want to be healed?”

*Read for the next session:* Chapter 11, then explore at least three websites of some of the organizations listed in the resource list on page 191.

## SESSION 6: Taking Steps toward God's Common Ground

*Read for the next session:* Chapter 11; also explore the websites of some of the organizations listed in the resources list.

*Supplies needed:* A marker and list of collateral damage. As you move through the session, add any additional forms of collateral damage to the list.

**Leader:** Welcome all and open with prayer.

1. The church has traditionally been a place where people bring their fears and grief to find comfort and hope. The fear and grief of gun violence overwhelm our nation: *This is our lane*. Does the church in America have the compassion and spiritual strength to engage in this work over the long term? Do you share Atwood's affirmation that working to prevent gun violence brings us into the joy of following Christ? Where do you see the presence of God in this issue?
2. After a mass shooting, there are calls for action and then usually a return to the lull of the status quo. Do you share Atwood's hope that we might finally "join a movement . . . with a spiritual, moral, and ethical awakening"? What signs of such a movement do you see? What can stall this movement? What can nourish it and strengthen it?
3. Atwood mentions several allies in the work of gun violence prevention, including gun violence survivors, law enforcement, first responders, mayors, teachers, emergency department personnel, and other doctors and nurses. In your community, who are some of the allies that you might reach out to as partners in this work? Are there active groups of students or other gun violence prevention groups in your community eager to find church allies in this work?
4. As you looked through the resources on pages 191–99, were there any surprises to you? As you explored some of the websites, what impressions did you gather? How might this section help you?
5. On page 189, Atwood asks, "Wouldn't it be great if the church of Jesus stepped out front to stop the killing?" What do you think he means by "out front"? What would that look like? Is the church in a unique position to help our nation find common ground for change? Why or why not? Go around the group and give each person a chance to share an idea or a vision of the church taking action to prevent gun violence.
6. On the issue of gun violence, who in your group senses a call to action? Please share that. What next steps will group members take? Can you think of a way to share the list of collateral damage that you have created? Spend a few minutes discussing next steps that you can plan right now to put you on the path to God's tomorrow.

*Closing ceremony:* Many Christians affirm ministry by the laying on of hands, symbolizing the hands that stretch back in the faith to the original disciples and to Jesus. Close your study by gathering for prayer around your list of collateral damage. Invite each person to lay one hand on the list and one hand on the person next to them, representing the hands of Jesus touching the damage inflicted by gun violence and anointing the faithful. After the leader offers a prayer, have everyone share in the passing of the peace of Christ to one another.

*For more educational, pastoral, and action resources, see The Gun Violence Prevention Congregational Toolkit, with a free download available at [www.presbypeacefellowship.org/gun-violence/](http://www.presbypeacefellowship.org/gun-violence/).*