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Female: Welcome to Conversations on Health Care with Mark Masselli and Margaret Flinter, a show where we speak to the top thought leaders in health innovation, health policy, care delivery, and the great minds who are shaping the health care of the future. This week, Mark and Margaret speak with US Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut, who's activism around sane gun laws was spawned by the Sandy Hook tragedy, in which a gunman killed 26 people, including 20 schoolchildren. Senator Murphy has written a critically acclaimed book *The Violence Inside Us: A Brief History Of An Ongoing American Tragedy* which examines the contributing causes of Americans gun violence epidemic, and the growing chorus for change.

Lori Robertson also checks in the Managing Editor of FactCheck.org looks at misstatements spoken about health policy in the public domain, separating the fake from the facts. We end with a bright idea that's improving health and wellbeing in everyday lives. If you have comments, please e-mail us at chcradio@chc1.com or find us on Facebook, Twitter, or wherever you listen to podcast. You can also hear us by asking Alexa to play the program Conversations on Health Care. Now stay tuned for our interview with US Senator Chris Murphy here on Conversations on Health Care.

Mark Masselli: We're speaking today with US Senator Chris Murphy from Connecticut. Prior to entering the Senate in 2013 he served three terms in the US House of Representatives. He's a member of several senate committees, including Health Education, Labor and Pension Committee, as well as Senate Foreign Relations and Senate Appropriation Committees.

Margaret Flinter: Senator Murphy is the author of the critically acclaimed new book *The Violence Inside Us: A Brief History Of An Ongoing American Tragedy*, which examines the contributing causes of America's gun violence epidemic and ultimately some solutions. His advocacy for saner gun laws was spurred by the Sandy Hook school shooting in 2012, which left 26 people dead, including 20 children. Senator Murphy, welcome to Conversations on Health Care.

Senator Chris Murphy: Yeah thanks for having me. Really appreciate it, and thanks for all your tremendous work and your great counsel and friendship to me over the years. Great to be with you.

Mark Masselli: Senator, we thank you for this compelling and such a well written book. As you note, America has a gun problem, and also has a public health problem exactly and just an incredible

toll on tens of thousands of Americans all across the United States. Your activism for the passage of the saner gun law comes about as you describe it as an awakening of confluence of two powerful events which really animated your work ever since. First is the terrible tragedy that, I think, all Americans know, which took place at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. But the other which was as compelling but probably a less well known story, but one that's really happening all across America, you're confronted by angry parents who had lost their child in inner city gun violence, which had largely been ignored. They demanded an answer as to why it took so long to recognize the epidemic of gun violence devastating their community. I wonder if you could just talk to our listeners about these pivotal events that launch you into this journey.

Senator Chris Murphy:

Well, I appreciate you give me the chance to talk about this book. This book is mostly a history of American violence and explanation as to why America has used violence over the centuries and decades in order to order our society, used normally by in groups as I call them, to suppress and keep subjugated out groups. It's, of course, also a book about the policies that incentivize violence, but also the policies that can spin us out of this cycle of violence.

Weave throughout this book is my story because, as you mentioned, while I think I was a pretty prodigious legislator, we worked a lot on the issue of health care when I was in the state legislature and in Congress. I admit that I was a legislator without an emotional attachment to an issue that sort of drove me to get up in the morning in the way that many issues do for many political actors. I got that emotional calling in the wake of Sandy Hook. But maybe just as important as the story I tell from a month and a half after Sandy Hook, maybe just a month after Sandy Hook, I go to this community center in the north end of Hartford, and I meet with these parents, the parents of the victims of gun violence in Hartford. They are just absolutely furious, right. Their message is what the hell took you so long? Where have you been? You've been in politics in Connecticut for over a decade, and now you're showing up in the north end of Hartford because 20 white kids in Newtown died? There were 20 kids and young men and women who died at the hands of guns in Hartford in 2012 alone before Sandy Hook ever happened, and now you're here?

The book actually starts with the story of one of those kids. In fact, a young man who died in an argument over a girl that

turned violent and deadly. Two months before Sandy Hook, Shane Oliver's death, just a stone's throw from my house in Hartford. The book is -- yeah it's a story of how I came to recognize that this was not just about the mass shootings, this was about 100 people dying every day from guns in this nation. It's about all of the kids who fear for their life who may never actually be shot, but have their brain chemistry changed by that daily fear of violence. It is a public health epidemic. It's one that now drives my life and my life's work. My hope is that in reading this book, which is really a primer on why America is so violent and what to do about it. It provides folks with the invitation to undergo some form of the same transformation that I've undergone over the last seven years.

Margaret Flinter:

Wow. Well, Senator, the book is incredibly compelling, and there's a lot of compelling stories and statistics in it. One that really struck me is this notation that Americans are 27 times more likely to die from gun violence than people in any other economically advantaged nation on Earth. We're not just talking about the mass shootings, which of course, command our attention, but 40,000 deaths by gun happened to this country last year alone. We're also talking about suicide, crimes of domestic violence, accidents, and other factors.

We had Nicholas Kristof and his wife Sheryl WuDunn on the show recently, and they were talking about deaths of despair in America, yet another area where we see an increase in early deaths by suicide by gun in particular, so many social determinants that play into America's history of guns and violence. You say not so much a gun problem maybe but really a story of poverty and economic disadvantage. You make the contrast between where you grew up not so far away from the north end of Harford. Talk with us a little bit about that.

Senator Chris Murphy:

What's interesting is that America is not much more violent than the rest of the world until about the middle 1800s. The first part of my book is sort of a history of American violence. At that point, our violence rates and our murder rates start to spiral upwards, and we become a global outlier and we never come back down to earth. What happens during that period of time is really threefold. First, we have this massive expansion of slavery in the United States after the invention of the cotton gin. In order to maintain a slave economy, you have to have epidemic levels of violence. America sort of becomes anesthetized to that violence because we need just gargantuan levels of it in order to keep a million people enslaved.

We also have the first giant wave of immigrants in the country. What we know, unfortunately, is that when you have a lot of people of different backgrounds competing for economic space, limited economic space, violence is an offshoot. We have this sort of biological instinct inside of us, unfortunately, to fear those that are different from us, or that we perceive to be part of a different tribe. As you have these big waves of immigration in America, you also tend to have spikes in violence. I use that to explain that whether we like it or not, America was probably designed to be a nation with higher rates of violence, because our entire economy is predicated on the use of violence.

The fact that we're melting pot is going to naturally lead to the sort of more violent contest. The problem is, there was a third factor that starts to spiral our rates upwards, and that is the invention of the handgun, at that same time. America decides not to regulate the use of the handgun like every other advanced nation, and all of a sudden this country which is already kind of a smoldering fire of violence, we decide to pour gasoline on it by arming the entire nation to the teeth.

A lot of sociologists who study they say, America was probably going to always be more violent. But we probably have twice the murder rate in this nation over our long history because of our refusal to control the spread of guns. That's the story. It's not all about guns, but guns is the sort of spark that has created this fire that is now out of control.

Mark Masselli:

But I do want to pull the thread on violence in America. Certainly if you're a black American, it's been a violent country for 400 years. We've heard the Black Lives Matter talk about that. You point out very clearly this is much about the story of race in America is about guns of the impact of centuries of slavery, Jim Crow laws, redlining mass incarceration, and all significant drivers of the African-American experience and what do you describe as Americans racist caste system. You offer what I thought were a couple of powerful quotes in your book, a soldier in Syria has less of a chance of dying than a 21 year old black American. Then an African-American man in Maryland is 14 times more likely to be killed in gun homicides than a white man in Maryland. I'm just wondering if you can pull together your thought as how race has helped shape your understanding of violence and how these two are intertwined.

Senator Chris Murphy:

You can't write a book about violence in America without writing a book about race because we have just changed the form of the violence that we perpetuate on people of color. It

starts out as slavery, it then changes itself into Jim Crow and lynching and vigilante justice. Today it's mass incarceration, and it's the intentional imprisonment of communities of color into neighborhoods of endemic poverty, the violence just looks different, but its intent is the same to maintain this racial caste system, where white folks are here and blacks are here. It takes many, many forms. We are unfortunately are dealing with one of those forms today, police officers using violence to kill and beat people of color. It also comes from the just vast undervaluing of black lives.

We just don't try as hard to solve crimes that are committed against African-Americans. What happens is that there becomes a system of self-help justice in these neighborhoods, because in Los Angeles only one third of murders are getting solved. Whereas in white suburbs, 80% of murders are being solved and so folks take justice into their own hands. There's so many ways in which our reliance on violence are devaluing of black lives has led to an increase of violent crime against those same communities.

At the same time, Mark, I do make the point in this book that it's dangerous to just look at violence through a racial prism because, in fact, violence in this country tracks poverty more closely than it tracks race. In fact, if you were a poor white person in the United States, you are just as likely to be the victim of a violent incident as you are a poor black person. It's just that we have way more people that are black in poverty because of this racial caste system that we've maintained. You have to both attack sort of endemic poverty and America's racist past and present if you want to do something about the violence rates in the nation.

Margaret Flinter:

Well, poverty, racism, health disparities, all tracked together and certainly in the midst of this COVID pandemic we are reminded and I want to thank you for your many, many, many years of fighting for access to health care for all people. But we're reminded that we still have too many people, even right here in your home state that don't have health insurance and don't always have access to health care. I wonder this link between gun violence, access to behavioral health care, mental illness. You, I thought, laid out some really interesting points in your book that maybe we shouldn't be looking at mental illness as the first path and finding it early when we're looking at gun violence. Yet, I know you would agree that we should be working very hard on making sure that everybody has access to health care, including behavioral health care. How do these all tie together in your understanding?

US Senator Chris Murphy

Senator Chris Murphy:

Yeah, I think it's really dangerous to make an equation between mental illness and violence. You guys do a wonderful job of talking about this because those of us that work in the field of health care know that people who are mentally ill are much more likely to be the victim of a violent episode, rather than the perpetrator of it. Of course, there's zero evidence that America has more mental illness than any other high income nation in the world, and yet we have a gun violence rate that's 20 times higher than everywhere else.

Even when you look at these mass shooters, I know it stands to reason that every single one of these mass shooters must be mentally ill. That's actually not true. Only about half these cases, is there even a sign of a diagnosable mental illness? Sometimes narcissism and megalomania, feeling of being an outcast along with easy access to an assault weapon can turn into a mass shooting even without a mental illness. I think we've got to solve our mental illness epidemic and our crisis of access to mental health services, period stop, and not think that is actually going to solve the problem of gun violence in this country because that problem is driven -- I argue in this book largely by issues of racism, poverty and access to guns. It's not that you don't work really hard on mental illness, you just don't expect that that's going to unlock all the keys to America's violence rates.

Mark Masselli:

We're speaking today with US Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut. He's author of critically acclaimed new book, *The Violence Inside Us: A Brief History Of An Ongoing American Tragedy*. I want to pull the thread on some of the solutions that you're recommending, and I note that you really put a premium on background checks. Also, walk through some of the successes, I think you also said Missouri was an example of where they repealed a gun law that they had in the increase.

But we had David Gergen on the show, and Gergen is always talking about is there American solution to our problems. I'm wondering if you could just share some examples both on the legislative side of things that could be done, but how do we find this seam of opportunity to work with people who are on the other side who don't necessarily understand that the only way to get there is through legislation. Are there other ways that you're promoting in terms of communication across the deep gulf that exist?

Senator Chris Murphy:

Well, I mentioned this opening story in this book is this 20 year old young man who was shot in October of 2012. He got into an argument with another group of boys about things they

were saying regarding his girlfriend. Now if that argument was to happen five miles away in the town that I grew up in Weathersfield, maybe one of those kids would have gotten a black tie, but that would have been the result of an argument over a girl. Unfortunately, there was an illegal weapons sitting in the front seat of one of the cars nearby. One of the folks who got hit, went and got that gun shot at Shane Oliver is dead.

That illegal guns started out as a legal gun. The reason why I'm such a [inaudible 00:17:13] on background checks is that if you make sure that everybody goes through a background check before they buy a gun, it's likely that that thing never finds its way to that car, because it is regularly felons who are selling these weapons on the streets of places like Hartford. They get them because they go down into places without background checks and buy a whole load of weapons from a gun store or from a gun show or online. By shutting down this illegal gun trade by requiring everybody to get a background check before they buy a gun, you'll just have far fewer guns out there and far fewer arguments that turn deadly.

You mentioned, how do we sort of bring folks together in this conversation. I'll push back on that a little bit because I think this is a little bit of a mythology, that is perpetuated all of this, this idea that guns is a super controversial issue, and that it's my responsibility to try to change the way that I talk about it in order to bring this country together. 95% of Americans think that universal background checks is a good idea. 70% of voters think that assault weapons should be banned. More than 50% of all republicans in this country don't think that assault weapons should be sold on our streets.

Guns, as it turns out, is one of the most unifying issues in the country. The NRA for years painted a picture of guns being the most controversial third rail in American politics. They were lying, it was never true. I think that right now it's all about sort of activating voters, getting more people intelligent about the choices that their members of Congress or their state legislators are taking they're often in contravention of 90% of voters. It's more today about education and activation, rather than about changing the way that we talk about this issue to try to move that number from 95 to 97. I don't know that that's a good use of our time as a movement.

Margaret Flinter:

Well, I'm going to take a few more minutes of our time on this one, because I think that is so fascinating. You've made the point in the book that maybe there's been some chinks in the

NRA's armor too, which certainly has been looked at as a pretty monolithically negative control over this. But in light of all the powerful advocacy groups that have emerged in recent years, in particular, since some of these mass shootings and high profile shootings, Everytown for Gun Safety, Moms Demand Action, Gabby Giffords Organization, the Stoneman Douglas kids who were amazing, I think, in their work as young people demanding change. Maybe talk about the landscape now in Washington, now that we know 97% of the country maybe isn't so wedded to things as they are. What's the climate politically in Washington? We're in an election year. What are your thoughts about this as a time where we might see some real change happen?

Senator Chris Murphy:

Well, it's fundamentally different today than it was in 2013. In this book, I tell the story of our failure to pass a background checks bill in 2013. I tell the story of the NRA, the NRA starts off as kind of a sleepy pro-gun control organization that gets taken over by a group of anti-government hardline right wingers in the 1970s and turn it into the NRA we know today which Brooks no compromise on gun laws. I think what happened over the last seven years is that we just stopped being afraid of the gun lobby. We stopped letting them set the agenda. We stopped letting them tell people that this was a controversial issue, and we got educated. We built our own movement. You referenced some of the groups that are most powerful, that's my hope for this book is that this book is a tool by which more people can get educated.

I tell the story in this book of a voter confronting me on the issue of guns way back when I was in the state legislature and how I very purposefully dodged the issue because I just thought I'd lose it, the argument. I was pretty sure he knew way more about guns and the second amendment than I did, and so I just kind of weaved around the confrontation. Well, I don't need to weave around those confrontations today, because I know just as much as the other side knows, and that's what I think we have benefited from the maturation of our movement, and more people having access to information in order to make this argument.

Mark Masselli:

We're in a time where we're talking about allies. I'm wondering what allies you could point to in terms of trying to embrace sort of this middle ground of making progress on this that you've worked with, and you've talked to a couple of compelling stories of Senator Manchin trying to get through some -- on a bipartisan basis. But talk about potential allies that might be out there where the people could emulate.

US Senator Chris Murphy

Senator Chris Murphy: Well, I do sort of make what some people will probably view as a surprising concession in this book. I admit that after my sort of long study of the constitution and the second amendment and the founding fathers intentions, I think there likely is a right to constitutional right to gun ownership.

Mark Masselli: The Heller Amendment.

Senator Chris Murphy: Yeah, the Heller decision, I think, is -- I wouldn't write it the same way they did. But I think it's largely corrected, as I think about how to try to bridge the political divides that exist in Congress. I argue in this book, that sort of Democrats saying, hey, listen we believe that there's a right to private gun ownership, but we also believe government has the ability to regulate that right. I think that's a really safe place for us to be.

I think there are new allies every single day. Last summer I spent a bunch of time negotiating a background checks bill with the president directly and with other Republicans, and we had all sorts of Republicans who wanted to work with us that would have never picked up my phone calls back in 2013. Some of them are doing that because they're legitimately moved by the pace of violence in this country and the number of mass shootings. But most of them are coming to the table, because they just fear the anti-gun violence movement politically more than they fear the gun lobby. That's why I make the argument at the end that, don't think too much about what to do, just do something every single day, every single week, do something that moves the needle on this issue, because as we raise that volume level, believe me, that will start to get my phone calls returned much more quickly.

Margaret Flinter: We've been speaking today with US Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut. He's the author of the critically acclaimed new book, *The Violence Inside Us: A Brief History Of An Ongoing American Tragedy*, a deep dive into America's gun violence epidemic. You can learn more about his important legislative efforts by going to murphy.senate.gov or follow him on twitter @Chris Murphy CT. Senator Murphy, we thank you for your dedication to public service for your commitment to this and so many public health causes over the years, and for joining us on Conversations on Health Care.

Senator Chris Murphy: Great, thank you guys.

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Mark Masselli: At Conversations on Health Care we want our audience to be truly in the know when it comes to the facts about health care

reform and policy. Lori Robertson is an award winning journalist and Managing Editor of FactCheck.org, a nonpartisan, nonprofit consumer advocate for voters that aim to reduce the level of deception in US politics. Lori, what have you got for us this week?

Lori Robertson:

Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden claimed President Donald Trump's effort in court to nullify the Affordable Care Act would "take 100 million people with preexisting conditions and move them in a direction where they can't get coverage." But they wouldn't all lose coverage as the claim misleadingly suggest, barring highly unlikely circumstances. It's true the Trump Administration has backed a lawsuit seeking to invalidate the Affordable Care Act. A decision from the Supreme Court on the case isn't expected until next year, and the ACA increased protections for those with preexisting medical conditions. Doing away with it in the absence of any new legislation would have repercussions.

The ACA prohibited insurers in any market from denying coverage, charging more or excluding coverage of certain conditions based on health status. The 100 million figure which comes from a 2018 report by the consulting firm Avalery [PH] is an estimate for the number of Americans outside of Medicare and Medicaid with preexisting conditions, including cardiovascular diseases, mental health disorders, obesity and diabetes. Without the ACA, they'd lose the preexisting condition protections in that law. But to be at risk of being denied insurance, they would have to seek coverage on the individual market or those without employer or public insurance by plans.

Only 6% of the population gets coverage on the individual market, while 49% have employer based plans. Before the ACA, those buying plans on the individual market could face denials or higher premiums based on their health. Employer based plans, however, couldn't deny insurance before the ACA, but they could decline coverage for some preexisting conditions for a limited period up to a year if a new employee had a lapse in coverage of more than 63 days. Biden made his claim in a late August interview on CNN, his campaign pointed out to us that the 100 million would be at risk of not being able to get coverage. But again, those Americans would have to be seeking coverage on the individual market to be denied an insurance plan outright. That's my fat check for this week. I'm Lori Robertson, Managing Editor of FactCheck.org.

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US Senator Chris Murphy

Margaret Flinter: FactCheck.org is committed to factual accuracy from the country's major political players and is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. If you have a fact that you'd like checked, e-mail us at www.chcradio.com, we'll have FactCheck.org's Lori Robertson check it out for you here on Conversations on Health Care.

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Margaret Flinter: Each week Conversations highlights a bright idea about how to make wellness a part of our communities and everyday lives. September is suicide prevention month, and it's of particular interest to the Veterans Administration. An estimated 22 veterans per day are taking their own lives in what's being described as a post-war suicide crisis. With a lack of behavioral health clinicians available for every veteran who is experiencing difficulty, the VA has launched a campaign aimed at all Americans who know veterans who may be struggling to be aware that they can make a difference just by reaching out. It's called the Power of One campaign. The idea that one person reaching out to one veteran in a caring manner can make a difference.

Female: The power of one small action, one conversation, or one phone call can make a difference in the life of a veteran going through a difficult time. For free 24/7 confidential support call the Veterans Crisis Line or the Military Crisis Line.

Margaret Flinter: According to Dr. Caitlin Thompson, Deputy Director of VA Suicide Prevention Program, it takes only a moment and just one small act can start them down the path to getting the support they need. The VA has launched a new suicide prevention hotline. It's now collaborating with community groups across the country to prepare them to better address the needs of these veterans, many of whom don't know how to ask for the help they need. Veterans, service members and anyone concerned about them can call the Veterans Crisis Line 1800-273-8255. They can chat online at [Veterans Crisis Line.net/chat](http://VeteransCrisisLine.net/chat) or send a text to 838255.

Even if they're not registered with the VA or enrolled in VA health care, all Veterans Crisis Line resources are optimized for mobile devices. A dedicated program aimed at reaching out to veterans across the country, empowering community groups and individuals to find ways of offering support to getting veterans the help they need before it's too late. Now, that's a bright idea.

US Senator Chris Murphy

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Mark Masselli: You've been listening to Conversations on Health Care. I'm Mark Masselli.

Margaret Flinter: And I'm Margaret Flinter.

Mark Masselli: Peace and Health.

Female: Conversations on Health Care is recorded at WESU at Wesleyan University, streaming live at www.chcradio.com, iTunes, or wherever you listen to podcast. If you have comments, please e-mail us at chcradio@chc1.com or find us on Facebook or Twitter. We love hearing from you. This show is brought to you by the Community Health Center.

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