

SOC 504 Reproducibility Memo

David Liu and Sri Nimmagadda

March 28, 2018

Background

We are replicating the results of a paper titled *Firearms and accidental deaths: Evidence from the aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting* [1]. The paper appeared in the December 2017 issue of Science and was authored by two economists from Wellesley College. We chose this paper to replicate because it is both recent and socially relevant as debates over gun control captivate the country.

The paper's main contribution was establishing a casual link between "gun exposure" and accidental deaths. In the article, gun exposure is measured both in terms of online activity, such as google searches relating to firearms, and in terms of gun purchases. An example of an "accidental death" would be an unintentional fatal firing from a firearm. To establish the causal claim, the authors first collected health and firearm data from a variety of government entities. Then, Levine and McKnight utilized fixed effects and instrumental variables in their casual inference analysis. The paper's statistical content relating to causal treatment effect overlap heavily with this course and SOC 500.

This memo will enumerate the specific replication objectives, recap our data collection process, and compare our results against those published in the paper. Finally, we propose extension ideas for feedback.

Replication Targets

It may be helpful to explicitly specify the values and quantities that we aim to replicate. All of the paper's claims are captured in its three figures and single table. The figures contain contextual data that setup the causal inference analysis, while the table is contains the regression outputs, the crux of the paper. Below, we will enumerate these four entities and their significance:

1. **Figure 1: Google Trends.** Using data from Google Trends, the authors argued that immediately after the Sandy Hook shooting, people had a greater interest in either purchasing a firearm or restoring an old one. For our replication, we will re-generate the two trend lines and compare them with the figure.
2. **Figure 2: Association between exposure and death** The most important figure in the paper, the second figure establishes a correlation between exposure and accidental deaths. On the same plot, the authors overlay trends in gun purchases as well as accidental deaths. It will be important to confirm that exposure and accidental deaths both spike following Sandy Hook.

3. **Figure 3: State-level trends in exposure** For visual clarity, the authors provided a geographical map highlighting states with high spikes in gun purchases following Sandy Hook. We will reproduce this state-level map.
4. **Table: Causal inference analysis** This is the most important replication target. The authors perform causal inference for two subpopulations (children and adults) and for each subpopulation, use two separate methods (OLD and IV) to establish casual effect. We will verify the values of these regression coefficients.

Restricted data

This paper did utilize restricted data which we were not able to obtain. Nevertheless, we were able to replicate the paper's primary focus because the restricted data only supplemented the main findings. Specifically, the authors demonstrated that, at a national level, the Sandy Hook shooting was followed by greater gun exposure, which caused additional accidental deaths. They then performed the same analysis at the state level, to further back up their causal claim. However, state-level mortality data is restricted so we were not able to replicate Figure 4 and Table 1, Panel 4 from the paper.

Data Collection

The original paper utilized four datasets for its analysis. These datasets originated from Google Trends, the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS), the National Cancer Institute's Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results program, and the CDC. Fortunately for us, the first three of these datasets were posted on the article's Dataverse. Then, following directions in the Dataverse README, we were able to obtain the mortality data from the CDC. The mortality data was most difficult to manage because the files were 10 GB in total. Otherwise, Dataverse enabled a relatively seamless data collection process.

Comparison of Results

Figure 1: Google Trends

The search trends figure was the most straight forward to replicate because it only utilized one data set. The Dataverse did not contain code to replicate the figure directly, but we were able to import the data into R and generate the figure with ggplot. A side-by-side comparison of the two graphs are shown in Figures ?? and 2.

The weeks on our x-axis are still quantified in an obscure manner, the but overall trends, especially the spike following Sandy Hook, match. The original article documentation states that Google Trends data itself may be unstable depending on the time of query. We have not yet assessed this claim but plan to do so.

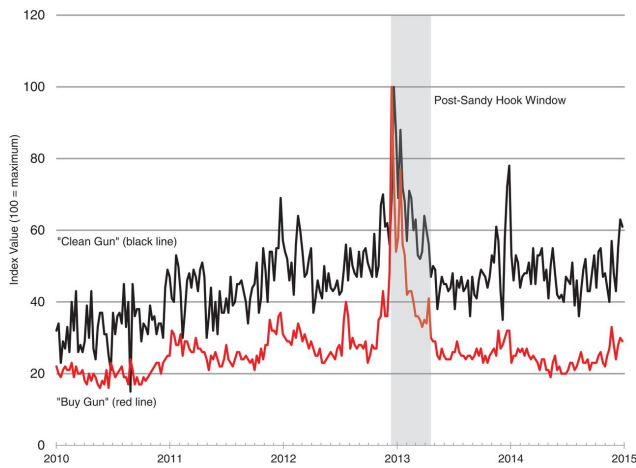


Figure 1: Original graph

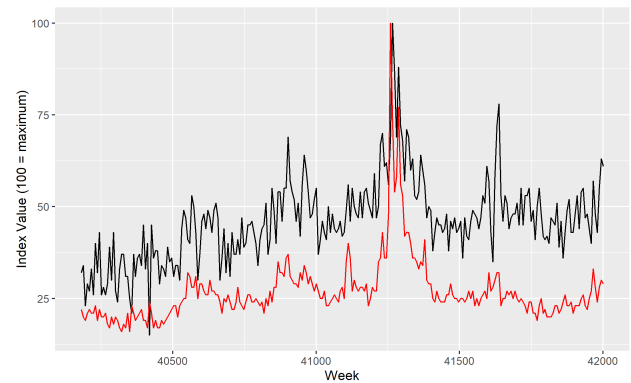


Figure 2: Generated graph

Figure 2: Association between exposure and deaths

This figure establishes a correlation between firearm exposure and accidental deaths, setting the stage for the causal inference that occurs later. In the replication process, we encountered a few discrepancies with the reported figures and code. We will discuss these differences in depth.

For context, the original figure label states that the data are "deviations" from the expected values. Taking a look at the code, this wording translates into fitting regressions for firearm sales and accidental deaths, individually, and then plotting the residuals. For the firearm sales the authors fitted a fixed effects regression that accounts for monthly seasonality and yearly trends. And for the accidental deaths data, the authors fitted a quadratic function of deaths on time. There does not appear to be any documentation on why a quadratic trend was shown.

After running the author's code, we developed the plot shown in Figures 3 and 4. For reference, the original plot is shown in Figure 5.

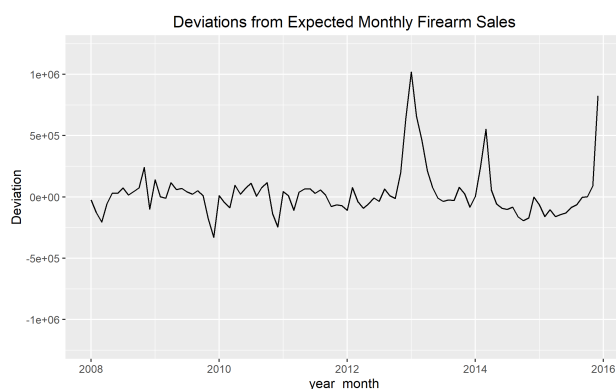


Figure 3: Sales deviations

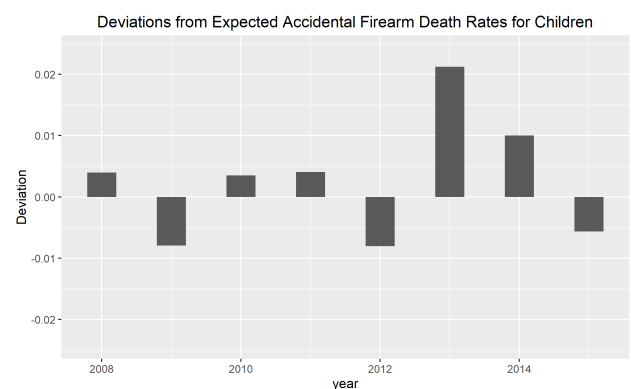


Figure 4: Firearms deaths deviations

Discrepancies with author's results

In order to create Figures 3 and 4, we discovered a minor bug in the author's Stata code: when building the fixed-effects regression, they mistakenly included the 2016 firearms data. In fact,

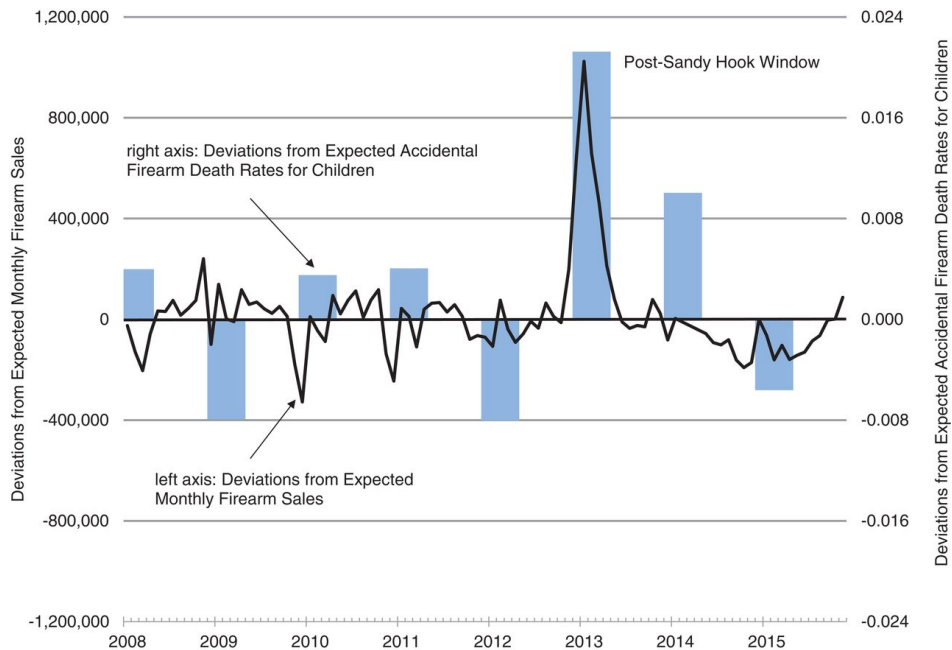


Figure 5: The original figure from the paper.

when running the Stata code as-is, we generate the plot shown in Figure 6. It is evident that including the 2016 data distorts the estimates for 2008 because both years must share a single fixed effects coefficient.

Even after excluding the 2016 data, we see that the firearms deviation line plot differs from the

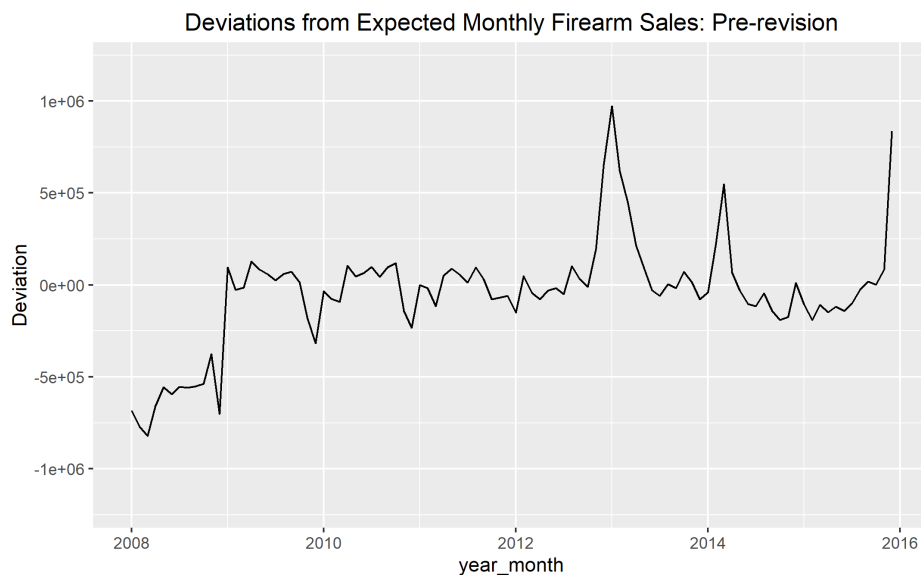


Figure 6: The original Stata code regressed on 2016 data which distorted estimates for 2008, the intended omitted variable.

one in the paper. Specifically, there is a noticeable peak in 2014 and the final data point, December 2015 is much higher in our plot. These values undermine the author's claim that the peak in firearm sales was unique to the Sandy-Hook area. We are still investigating the source of the discrepancy.

Figure 3: State-level trends in exposure

Causal inference analysis

Extension Proposals

Proposal 1

Proposal 2

Proposal 3

References

- [1] P. B. Levine and R. McKnight, “Firearms and accidental deaths: Evidence from the aftermath of the sandy hook school shooting,” *Science*, vol. 358, no. 6368, pp. 1324–1328, 2017. [Online]. Available: <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/358/6368/1324>

Appendix