

Chapter Spotlight: Arizona SSN Launches to Connect Researchers across the State

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While Arizona may currently be in the national spotlight because of its crucial role in the 2024 election, the state's significance goes far beyond electoral politics. In many ways, Arizona is a policy laboratory, where new ideas and approaches to issues like immigration and criminal justice are tested. To make the most of this dynamic policy landscape and support scholars looking to contribute to policy change and innovation, Professors [Bradley J. Bartos](#) (University of Arizona) and [Jennifer Carlson](#) (Arizona State University) recently teamed up to launch the [Arizona chapter of the Scholars Strategy Network](#). By providing a space for researchers to collaborate, share their expertise, and learn new skills, Bartos and Carlson hope to foster a community of publicly engaged scholars in their home state.

SSN spoke with Bartos and Carlson following the launch event for the Arizona chapter to learn more about their background, inspiration for starting the chapter, and goals for the future. The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What was your path towards public scholarship?

Jennifer: I study gun politics, everything from gun law, to gun rights, to gun violence, really all sort of aspects of this issue. It's really hard to study this topic and not be publicly engaged because it is so impactful and so personal in so many different ways for so many different people. I was interested in this topic very early on, not just because it is an important thread in American society, but also because there is just so much variation, nuance, and complexity in terms of how people experience guns in their lives.

I really felt that part of what I was doing as a sociologist was not just to create sociological theory and expand our academic knowledge, but actually try and challenge some of the dominant perspectives in society surrounding guns, which I think oftentimes, even if they get at some truth, make a lot of assumptions about the other side, whatever the other side is.

Bradley: My route to public scholarship is a bit winding, but initially I became interested in research generally because I saw mass incarceration and the war on drugs. This was post-2008 and there was some new

consensus about how we passed the point of diminishing returns on incarceration and that there had to be a more cost-effective, and potentially more humane, way to do criminal justice. At that point, however, I also realized how impossible it is to try new things experimentally in that area, so my interest really shifted towards methods for evaluating quasi-experiments, things that we're trying, when we try them.

So, there are a number of events that have drawn my research methods applied to policy analysis attention over the years. Some of them have been changes in drug policy, sentencing policy, and now gun control laws that have more or less taken primary focus of my imagination as a researcher and as an individual and a new father.



Mandana Mohsenzadegan, SSN's Director of Member Engagement, presents at Arizona SSN's launch event.

How did learn about SSN and what inspired you to start this Arizona chapter?

Jennifer: The prospect of starting an SSN chapter in Arizona came out of what I'm doing primarily now, which is building the [Center for the Study of Guns in Society](https://scholars.org) at Arizona State University. The center is aimed at not just bringing together the scholarly community that already exists, but training, preparing, and elevating the next generation of gun scholars. As I was talking to other people around the country who have built centers and initiatives around hot political topics, I was made aware of just all the amazing work that SSN does to

support scholars doing exactly that kind of work. It just seemed like a treasure trove, like an amazing opportunity to connect with this kind of organization and to really support what I see as one of the core pillars of this center.

Now, of course, SSN in Arizona is not just about the center. I think that Arizona is a fascinating place because it is extremely politically dynamic. I say this living in Maricopa County, living not just in a swing state, but in a swing county. And I think that there are not just opportunities because we're a swing state, but also there are certain policy opportunities that get put on the table in red states that are moving purple. Making sure that the scholarly community is poised to be able to take advantage of those opportunities in a responsible and ethical way is one of the reasons why I think it's exciting to work with SSN in that capacity.

Bradley: Arizona is interesting and dynamic in a variety of policy areas. Arizona is trying new things, it is experimenting with policies that are cutting edge in terms of recreational marijuana, there are discussions about how to address fentanyl, border crossings, immigration, firearms, the nexus of goods flowing across borders for both nations. This is a kind of transcendent issue that pervades a variety of policy areas and there is an exceptional amount of potential energy flowing into Arizona right now.

The Scholars Strategy Network entered my radar from two of my mentors at UC Irvine, Bryan Sykes and Charis Kubrin, who I've published both op-eds and research alongside and who have seen the value of their Scholars Strategy Network media training at play. Many people back away from the firearm space for various, clear factual incentives or disincentives and I know how essential it is to have a network and some resources to support public facing scholarship in areas where there are divisive opinions. There are many things that you're asked to do in academia that you're never trained to do. Public facing writing and presentation of your ideas seems the most negligent to have provided very little training to the field, and it's comforting, empowering, and reassuring to have a network and some support resources.

The chapter launched in August with an in-person event. What were the goals of that event and how did it go?

Jennifer: The goal of that retreat was to get everybody in the room who's affiliated across Arizona with the center and just start building community. Even though in some ways it's the least recognized aspect of what we do, I actually think the most fulfilling part of an academic career is building that sense of scholarly community.

The other piece that we wanted to focus on was just giving everybody a common language. Even though guns may seem like a very narrow topic, you could be studying gun violence and feel very uncomfortable having a conversation about the intricacies of the second Amendment. Or you could be studying this very small aspect of gun culture and have no idea of what's going on in these other spaces. So, just giving everybody a common language and a common orientation in terms of where other people sit in this field and where you sit.

And then the second half of the day was really focused on thinking about outreach and how we engage with the world beyond academia. We invited these reporters and I wanted to have a conversation that was kind of off the record. This is just a conversation where we are all in a room as academics, as journalists, talking about how do we work together better. It was a really interesting conversation because in Arizona, we don't have journalists who focus specifically on guns. That says a lot about how we think about the issue and it raises this question of how we connect with the media. How can we facilitate the media doing their job better? I think hearing about where they see research not rising up to the needs of where the public discourse is going was helpful and made for a fascinating conversation.

Bradley: One of the more impactful impressions of the event was immediate. There's emergency room doctors, trauma surgeons, sociologists that study guns, psychologists, constitutional legal scholars. The people you need to have at a table to essentially cover all important foundations of a conversation on guns were there and I believe what was immediately apparent was everybody recognized just how rare of an opportunity it is to be in a room full of people that cover all these spaces and it kind of made the room a little electric feeling. Right now we're all having the conversation that we want to be having, which is what is our role in this social problem? How can we combine our efforts, communicate better? And those types of conversations are rare in all areas, not just academia.

On top of that, the journalist panel in the afternoon really boiled down to issues of perspective. For us as researchers, figuring out how to make our outputs facilitate and feed into the inputs of these journalists was a very useful reframing. Seeing just how these journalists describe their workflow and how they respond to a policy change regarding firearms or a mass shooting tragedy event, and in what instances they're seeking researcher input, the forms of researcher input they're looking for, and how they would go about finding us, was all very insightful. It was practical knowledge, but it also helps us understand ourselves a bit better in terms of what types of outputs we produce and when to make those available to members of the media.



Retreat participants gather for a happy hour following the conclusion of the event.

Looking ahead, what are your goals and hopes for the Arizona Scholar Strategy Network chapter?

Bradley: This fall there are a number of election integrity related activities that current SSN members in Arizona are participating in and we want to use that opportunity to bring all of those already contributing members into the fold to build some momentum around their work. So in the immediate future of the chapter, I think bringing scholars that are either tangentially or informally aware or integrated with SSN into the chapter fold is very doable. Beyond that, Arizona continues to be a policy laboratory. There are a number of areas in which Arizona represents more or less of a polarizing extreme on certain policies, and that also makes it interesting to see in comparison to other states. So there are a lot of opportunities and we will hopefully provide a community to scholars across universities in this state that previously didn't exist.

Jennifer: What I'm really excited about is the community building and also building that capacity to support junior scholars. I think there's a lot of excitement and we are planning a symposium at ASU called [Elevating the Gun Debate, Bridging Gun Divides](#) in January. Part of that will be supported by SSN and really geared at providing those tools for scholars to be able to engage with confidence in all the ways SSN encourages. While the vision is that it's for junior scholars, I have a feeling that, given the kinds of abstracts that we've received, a lot of scholars are going to say, "Actually, I'm staying for this too."