This is a transcript of The Conversation Weekly podcast episode 'Inside Brazil's divisive gun debate', published on October 13 2022.

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Dan: Welcome to The Conversation Weekly. I'm Dan Merino, today in Denver, Colorado.

Gemma: And I'm Gemma Ware in Paris. And this week we're heading to Brazil to find out what a big rise in gun ownership there means for a country where fears are mounting over political violence.

Dan: Gun ownership and political violence. That certainly sounds familiar to me as an American. So where do we start this story, Gemma?

Gemma: We're gonna start it on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro at a training facility for private security guards.

Erika Robb Larkins: They're not fancy, I should say that right away.

Gemma: This is Erica Robb Larkins. She's been spending a lot of time recently hanging out in training schools for security guards in Rio De Janeiro.

Erika: They're mostly located on the peripheral areas of the city, let's say, where real estate is cheap and you can have a big warehouse and there's a couple of kind of dilapidated classrooms. None of the furniture is nice. You should definitely conjure in your mind an image of a very humble place, right that has very little infrastructure and is gonna train sort of the lowest level foot soldiers in this ongoing struggle to secure the city.

Gemma: Erika is an associate professor of anthropology at San Diego State University in the US, where she's also the director of the Behner Stiefel Center for Brazilian Studies for Brazilian studies. Her research looks at the anthropology of violence.

Erika: I've been going to Brazil since I was young, and so it was sort of logical for me to combine my interest in the study of violence with my interest in Brazil.

Gemma: Erika started out researching violence in favelas, and she actually lived in one during her PhD. She saw a lot of violence there, gun battles regularly between drug traffickers and police, and she became fascinated in the way the favelas were policed. So she began interviewing police officers about it.

Erika: Lots of these high ranking police officers would mention that they owned private security companies. Currently in Brazil, there are more private security guards than police. But we know very little about the field. They're not very well regulated but they're enmeshed with and intertwined with police and military in very significant ways. And so I wanted to kind of untangle that puzzle. And so I started to follow private security guards through their training and then into the workplace. So I spent a lot of time in these private security training facilities.

Gemma: All the security guards have a basic form of weapons training as part of their course.

Erika: At the time that I was doing my research, the armed theft of cargo was incredibly high in Rio, and so a lot of the courses that I accompanied were populated by people that were going to go into these really high combat situations. They were gonna be carrying a gun every day and possibly taking fire almost every day in their workplaces. Despite that, however, the training is incredibly rudimentary. I mean shockingly rudimentary, and I witnessed that firsthand myself. It was quite clear to me that the amount of contact that folks had with guns before going into these sort of work environments where they were gonna use them every day, was cursory at best.

Gemma: The weapons the guards were being trained with were often old, broken, and prone to jamming. Although ironically, the service weapons they're given when they start work as security guards often have similar problems.

Erika: The instructor would come and put a bunch of guns on a plastic table and we would sit there and load and unload the guns as a way to sort of create a muscle memory and have an interaction with them, that would hopefully provide some kind of a familiarity that could be carried over to the workplace.

Gemma: So, you're good at this now too?

Erika: I mean I would not say that I'm good. I would say that by the end of my field work, my hands wouldn't shake. And at the beginning of my field work, I had never held a gun before and I was really nervous.

Gemma: As she was sitting there talking to the trainee security guards, loading and unloading their glitchy guns, Erika began to find out more about who they were. For the most part, these men, and they were all men, were black and came from poor backgrounds.

Erika: But as you move through the hierarchy, the skin tones change. Right? So this tells you a lot about structural racism in Brazil as well, because the owners of the companies are not black, you know, and even the managers are usually more light skinned than the lowest level guards.

Gemma: She found that the lower level guards broadly fitted into two main groups.

Erika: One is people that are interested in this career path – not because they're longing to work in these militarized settings, but because it offers them a formal work contract, an insurance plan, and they earn a little more money than they would in another industry because there's a special bonus that they get for working in a high-risk setting. People that do not have a lot of other options, maybe even live in a favela and are interested in doing this because of the job security that they will have as a result of doing it.

Gemma: This group of guards were fairly cynical about their work and would sometimes refer to themselves as cannon fodder.

Erika: The other group has maybe a military background. Perhaps they enjoyed their military service. They like working with guns. They have some technical background or training. I'm thinking of one person in particular that I interviewed at one of the training schools and I said, "Well, why are you in this profession?" And he was like "Well, the war is already here. I'm just going to it. Instead of it coming to me." And I was sort of like "Well, what war?" You know and he was like "Well, the war between good upstanding citizens and criminals who try to rob people" and sew discord in general, right? So there's this idea that that's a dynamic that already exists, and that by being a guard, he would set the terms of engagement. So, he had had an experience. He recounted to me an experience of being robbed on a bus. And he was like, that's never gonna happen to me again. You know, I'm not gonna be a victim in that way.

Gemma: This second group were intrigued by American gun culture, and this is something that Erika also saw amongst drug traffickers who lived in the Rio favela.

Erika: There were drug traffickers whose nicknames were Rambo. People made constant reference to US films, especially about the US military. Traffickers that I interviewed, talked about how beautiful the US army fatigues were and how amazing the US army's equipment was.

Gemma: The security guards were also really interested in Americans' access to guns.

Erika: They were often asking me lots of questions, like, you know, I heard you can just go into the Walmart and buy a gun in the US. Is that true? But overall, they were intrigued by the access to guns and the easy access. And often would say "Well, we wouldn't have the problems that we have in Brazil if everyone could just have a gun. Or if they had a gun."

Dan: This argument that good guys with guns can help protect the world from bad guys with guns is super common to hear from gun rights advocates, at least in the United States. Do people in Brazil feel safer when they're around guns?

Gemma: They really don't actually. So a survey just a couple of months ago in August of around 2000 Brazilians found that nearly seven in ten were really fearful of being around people with guns and nearly a third said that they would buy a gun if they could. So no, they don't.

Dan: What's the stance of yours on Bolsonaro, the president at the center of a lot that is going on right now?

Gemma: Well, he has actually been trying to make it easier for people to buy guns and encouraging his supporters to go out and do so. And this is actually making a lot of people really worried about political violence in Brazil. Particularly as the country is heading towards the second round of its presidential election later this month on the 30th of October.

News clip: "Four more weeks of a bruising campaign began in Brazil today after none of the candidates won 50% of the vote in Sunday's first round… Socialist former President Lula da Silva has 48%. The right wing incumbent Jair Bolsonaro won 44% of the vote."

Dan: Sounds like guns are really a central part of this and potentially in a sketchy way. I mean, we just had January 6th in the United States. Is that what's on people's mind?

Gemma: It really is. There's a lot of people who are very worried about that, and I've been talking to a couple of experts about how gun culture is changing in Brazil, why Bolsonaro wants more people to go out and buy guns, and who is actually doing so and what this might all mean longer term for the country.

Juliano: My name is Juliano Cortinhas. I'm a professor at the University of Brasilia.

Gemma: Juliano specializes in international security and defence. In the early 2010s, he worked for four years in the Brazilian government in the Ministry of Defense. He's also lived in the US on three separate occasions, and so I asked him, did he see more guns when he lived in the US or in Brazil?

Juliano: In the US for sure. Especially when I was in Texas, people carry guns openly and in Brazil you don't see guns, you don't live with them if you are not in specific environments, like the favelas. We have a more restrictive policy towards guns. Bolsonaro changed that, but even under Bolsonaro you don't live with guns. You don't see them in your day to day life. You don't see them being sold openly in stores. In the US, that's very common. On the other hand, I feel more unsafe here in Brazil than in the US because you see on the data that we are a much more violent country.

Gemma: In 2019, more than 49,000 people in Brazil were killed by guns. The highest absolute number in the world, that's about 22 deaths for every 100,000 people compared to about 11 deaths for 100,000 in the US.

Juliano: We have a very entrenched culture of violence, right? That's not only in Brazil. In Latin America, we have more than 50 of the most violent cities in the world, right? So we live in a very violent society. There are a lot of people who solve their problems through violence. There are a lot of domestic violence. It is not only a cultural problem, but it is also a social problem, right? Inequality increases the level of violence in a country.

Gemma: In the US a lot of the gun debate is centered around the US constitution and the interpretation of its second amendment on the right to bear arms. But that's not the case in Brazil.

Juliano: There is a historical connection between Americans and guns, right? They are a very militarized society. Every generation has fought in wars, so they live more openly with guns than we do. Brazil is a country that is internationally peaceful. We don't fight a war for more than 150 years. So we don't have this historical connection with the necessity of bearing weapons.

Gemma: And yet the gun debate in the US, particularly by those opposed to gun control, really does influence some people's views on guns inside Brazil.

Juliano: When you introduce in the Brazilian society, this kind of logic that is produced in the United States by the far right over there, people receive these arguments. That is, if you carry a weapon, you'll be safer, which is very disconnected to our reality. A lot of studies have proven that if you are carrying a weapon and you are robbed, your chance of getting killed is higher than if you don't have a weapon. So it actually makes you more unsafe. There's also no correlation between countries in which people carry more guns and, uh, decrease of violence, right? So violence is much more connected to cultural and other variables such as, where you live, drug trafficking and things like that.

Gemma: Bolsonaro himself is a living example of this. Before becoming president, when he was a deputy in the Brazilian congress, he was robbed in Rio de Janeiro.

Juliano: He was carrying a weapon and the guy who robbed him, robbed his weapon, right? He then got in contact with the armed forces and with the Rio police, and they found his weapon after a few days, but so he is a living proof that it doesn't matter if you're carrying a weapon or not, the chances of being robbed are not decreased by that.

Gemma: In the 1990s, a movement emerged in Brazil pushing for more gun control. It was led in part by an NGO called Sou da Paz. Eventually in 2003, in the first year of Lula's first presidency, Brazil's congress passed what's called the disarmament statute. It prohibited most civilians from owning and carrying guns except for particular circumstances such as hunting. The age to buy a gun also increased from 21 to 25, and a process opened up for people to voluntarily return their guns to the authorities. One study published in 2020 found that those areas of Brazil, including San Paulo and Rio, that collected more guns than other areas under the

disarmament statute, reduced the rate of violent gun deaths. The next step was in 2005, when Brazil held a referendum on whether to completely ban the sale of guns and ammunition to civilians. The referendum was defeated by a two-thirds majority. I asked Juliano why he thought Brazilians didn't agree back then to bring in even more gun control.

Juliano: I think that there was a very important lobby back then. Brazil is one of the biggest producers of personal weapons in the world. We export most of them, but these guys are very powerful within the Brazilian government and they campaigned within the Brazilian society. And there is this sense of violence. Right. There is this idea that you can be robbed and if things get worse in our country, it would be important to have the choice of buying or not buying a weapon. So I think that people decided to keep this choice open. That doesn't mean that everyone ran to gun shops to buy weapons, back then. But under Bolsonaro, this became much bigger.

News clip: President Jair Bolsonaro says the best way of reducing crime in Brazil is to arm more people. He's just taken measures to make weapons and ammunition more widely available in a country that has one of the world's largest number of homicides.

Gemma: Tell me about what he's done then since he was elected in 2018 and then came to power in January 2019. How has he relaxed rules about buying guns? Can you talk me through what's happened in the past few years?

Juliano: It became much easier under Bolsonaro, the number of weapons that you can acquire, the situations in which you can carry, these were all flexibilized. Today, if you have the interest of purchasing a gun, you have to declare yourself as a collector or a hunter or a person who practices shooting and see that as a sport. And If you are under the three labels, you can inscribe yourself into the system and purchase guns.

Gemma: These hunting, shooting and collectioners licenses are known by the acronym CACs. According to the NGO Sou da Paz, the number of people registered with CAC licenses stood at 673,000 in July 2022. That's up nearly 500% since Bolsonaro's election in 2018. These CAC license holders now own more than 1 million registered guns. To get a CAC license, you have to do a shooting course, and there's been a boom in shooting clubs, as a result. The number of clubs rose from 163 in 2018, to more than 2000 this year. It's now easier to carry a gun too. You can just say you're on the way to using it at the gun.

Another thing Bolsonaro has done is to allow CAC holders to own more weapons. Hunters can now buy 30 guns each and sports shooters up to 60. Put together with other types of private gun license, for example, for members of the military and civil servants, Sou da Paz estimates that there were 2.7 million privately owned guns in Brazil in July this year. That's up 106% since 2018.

Juliano: People started buying so many guns that the army couldn't keep control of the guns that were being sold and they actually declared that to the press. There are studies showing that some of these weapons that were legally purchased are now under the control of drug lords.

Gemma: A few weeks ago, the news agency Reuters spoke to over a dozen police officers across Brazil who said that guns bought legally under the relaxed laws are being used to commit crimes.

News Clip: Over a dozen federal and state police officers told Reuters there is mounting evidence that legitimately acquired weapons are leaking onto the black market and are being used to commit crimes across the country.

Juliano: They are actually using people who don't have any legal problems to purchase the weapon and then pass this weapon to them.

News Clip: Federal officers said Brazil's gangs are increasingly using legalized gun owners as straw buyers to replenish arsenals. Or even steal weapons from CAC permit holders' homes.

Juliano: Traditionally, drug traffickers were using illegal weapons that were sometimes produced in Brazil, exported to Paraguay or other bordering countries, and then they would smuggle the weapons back to Brazil. Now, some of the drug traffickers are preparing to buy legal weapons.

Dan: All right, so we've got these drug smugglers. These people generally using guns for illegal activities, acquiring more guns, either through illegal or increasingly more legal means. Or we've heard from people like the security guards Erika spoke to earlier that think guns are good and can help promote safety. So are these people also buying guns for personal use, for safety?

Gemma: Well, you'd think they might be, but actually Erika told me that no, that most of them can't afford to buy a gun. Guns in Brazil are actually really expensive, and it's actually mainly rich of Brazilians who are able to go out and buy them.

Dan: Well, it sounds like guns may have become technically easier to acquire, but people can't afford them. So what's going on here? What's the play, what's Bolsonaro doing?

Gemma: Well, Bolsonaro did actually try to make guns a little bit cheaper by reducing some of the taxes on them, but it hasn't really made them broadly accessible to most people in Brazil.

Juliano: Which is very awkward because this richer part of the Brazilian population is not the part that suffers from violence, right? If you see statistics on homicides, who is the victim? The young who don't carry weapons? Black population who is unfortunately poorer in Brazil because of the high levels of racism in our country; and men, right? So more than 90% of the violent deaths in Brazil affect this part of our population. And this is not the group who is purchasing

weapons. Who is purchasing weapons? White older men. This creates a huge gap between discourse and reality.

Gemma: Bolsonaro regularly makes the sign of the gun with his thumb and forefinger when he's out campaigning, and he's made gun ownership one of the pillars of his political platform. Erila told me guns form a central part of his rhetoric.

Erika: Recently he made a comment to a group of supporters saying "Armed people can never be enslaved."

News Clip: If we have to fight against Lula's gang, we will fight. And I repeat, armed people will never be enslaved.

Erika: I think this is a really dangerous sentiment that also really encapsulates the vision of the world that we're seeing here that is so concerning, which is that his supporters believe that they're on the precipice of enslavement and that a gun is the only thing that stands between them and being in some kind of imagined communist jail. This is really delusional, right? This is so far from the reality, but is really inflammatory and speaks exactly to this vision of the world that he's promoting.

Gemma: Bolsonaro's argument is that Brazilians don't just need a gun to protect themselves from criminals, but also from a whole group of other people in the country who he doesn't like.

Erika: What Bolsonaro has done is really empower extreme levels of violence against people that he perceives as not encompassing a certain kind of set of moral values. What we've seen is a collapse of his political enemies into a category that also includes criminals, right? It's like a bank robber is the same as a leftist. A drug trafficker is almost the same as a communist, like they're all talked about within the same kind of a frame as these threats to the nation as these threats to Brazil's social order. And all of these people that are on sort of "the side of good", including lots of these security guards, really have been brought into the fold of people that are working on sort of saving Brazil from the precipice that he's presented it as being on.

Gemma: Bolsonaro says it's the duty of what he calls the "cidadãos de bem" in Portuguese, or the good citizen to own a gun to protect themselves. I asked Erika, if you are someone who sees yourself as one of these so-called good citizens, and Bolsonaro is telling you to go out and buy a gun, who is the bad citizen and what's your responsibility against them?

Erika: It's so complex, right? And yet not complex at the same time, right? The moral upright citizen in this vision of the world is a white heteronormative man who is protecting his home and traditional family values and everything else that's not that, or isn't aspiring to that is on the other side. So women's rights, LGBTQ rights, people that are calling out Brazil's systemic racism,

People on the left, you know, everything else that is not that. And it's both, not that in terms of identity, but also not that in terms of political beliefs. Right. So, I think that's where we're really seeing this polarization. It's like a criminal is somehow equated with a woman that wants to work outside the home or challenges patriarchy, you know? So the expansion of the enemy has certainly happened in this particular moment, and owning a gun is part of that, right? The discourse should be very familiar, at least I think to US listeners, because it's quite similar to the right wing discourse in the United States, which is really about the return to certain kinds of family values and the protection of the right of the white, heteronormative family against immigrants, etc. And the gun has a central role in that. And I think that's where we see, the ways in which US right is sort of shaping and influencing the gun discourse in Brazil because Brazil didn't really have that kind of discourse before. And that the ways in which owning the gun, using the gun to protect the home has been inserted into this discourse is kind of novel and shows that there's been sort of an exploitation, let's say of the American right.

Gemma: If you are somebody who you say, "Well, I'm a good citizen, therefore I own a gun and I protect my family." What's your view of the police and their role? Do you feel that you should be kind of acting like a policeman like you are, or you're standing in for the police?

Erika: I think that's a great question and one that gets at a number of issues that are illustrative of the dynamics that we've been talking about. On the one hand, people really see the police as not well enough trained and not capable of doing their jobs. So there's a sense that police can't be trusted, that police are corrupt, and that police just can't handle all of the vagabundos. 'Vagabundo' is like a catchall term for all the people that represent the moral decay that Bolsonaro's followers don't like. Right. So, there's this idea that the police just can't handle the volume of enemies out there. So they need some help in that matter. But there's also this idea that the police are restricted and can't do their job because of these terrible human rights discourses that say that they have to arrest criminals instead of shooting them. So the police would be fine if they were just given free reign to use their own moral judgment to do whatever they wanted.

Dan: Gemma, I'm wondering now at this point in this story, what the evidence is showing about safety, with regards to guns. Often when you hear about the gun debate, it's a balance between, sure increased access to guns, may result in some decrease in violence or something like that. But then you have increased suicides. You have increased accidents, like children getting their hands on their parents' guns. Has there been any research looking at the effect of loosening of gun regulations in Brazil, yet?

Gemma: There is evidence on this kind of stuff it, it's a little bit patchy, but there's an annual study by researchers at the University of Sao Paulo, and they reported in 2021 that murders fell 7% to 41,000.

Dan: Oh, a 7% drop certainly isn't nothing, but there's so many factors that go into murder rates. Social, economic… gun access might be one of them. I imagine, pro gun people are saying that it's a 100% the guns. I imagine it's more complicated than that.

Gemma: Exactly, Bolsonaro is championing this saying, you know, our gun laws reduced gun violence. But the context here is important because there's actually been a general downward trend in murders in Brazil since 2017, before Bolsonaro began relaxing the gun laws altogether. And the researchers say the increase in gun ownership hasn't had a broader effect on murder trends. They put it down to a number of other factors.

Dan: OK, so regardless of how guns have affected the actual murder rate in Brazil – the situation is that there's a lot more of them and seemingly in the hands of Bolsonaro supporters. What's gonna happen now?

Gemma: Well, that is really the big question. So the runoff is in a couple of weeks on the 30th October. And Bolsonaro has been casting doubt on the electoral system alleging fraud, which is obviously something that happened in the US, a bit like when Trump was up for re-election in 2020. So for Juliano, his big concern is that those Brazilians who've armed themselves, as Bolsonaro is telling them to do as good Brazilian citizens, are a massive threat to Brazil's democracy.

Juliano: These are the people who are going to the streets if he loses the second round, a lot of these people are gonna be carrying guns.

Gemma: Political violence is not new in Brazil, and it's been a characteristic of previous elections too. But in the run up to the first round of the presidential elections on 2 October, there was a spike in political violence. A group of researchers at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro State counted 212 episodes of political violence between July and September; up 70% on the same period ahead of municipal elections two years ago. In early September, a Bolsonaro supporter killed a Lula supporter.

News Clip: In recent weeks, the campaign has taken a dramatic turn. In July, in the middle of a birthday party, a Worker's Party activist was killed by a pro-Bolsonaro's policeman.

Gemma: A few weeks later a man was stabbed to death at a bar in northeast Brazil after announcing his support for Lula. A Lula supporter also admitted killing a Bolsonaro supporter in early October. In fact, in September, the Brazilian Supreme Court even suspended some of Bolsonaro's gun relaxation degrees after fears of electoral violence. Juliano told me he's really anxious about what comes next.

Juliano: I think that the most credible scenario is a scenario in which the elections will go on and the results are gonna be accepted. And if some people try to invade our Congress or something similar to January 6th in the United States, I think that the police and the armed forces are going to act.

Gemma: He also thinks that if there is to be any kind of political rupture in Brazil, it's more likely to happen if the result in the second round is very close.

Juliano: Some people go out on the street, they are armed and they denouncing frauds. Other people start joining this movement and it starts growing and getting bigger. Then, the police forces don't act against these people because the police forces themselves support Bolsonaro. And this goes on for a day or two or three, and then you increase the size of this movement as far as taking the armed forces into this mess. And they, uh, uh, they show off as the saviors of the Brazilian democracy.

Gemma: If he wins, Lula has promised to roll back Bolsonaro's relaxation of gun regulations, many of which were passed as executive orders rather than actual laws in parliament. I asked Juliano, regardless of who wins the election, what longer term impact does he think the increase in gun ownership and the debate around it will have on Brazilian society?

Juliano: Well, I think that living in a society, in which more guns are circulating scares me. And, and it scares everyone that studies security. The threats to our democracy are higher because of the radicalism of most of the people who are acquiring these weapons and in our day to day lives the possibility of violence becomes increased and this may worsen the culture of violence in the country. So I think that the ideal way to address this issue is through education, education for peace, education for the young people to understand that a different world, a different way of solving your problems may emerge. And this is one of the reasons me and my colleagues are researching how the Brazilian youth sees violence. And we've been perceiving that they don't agree with Bolsonaro's policies. They don't agree with Bolsonaro's views on violence. They think that there are different ways to solve your own problems.

Gemma: What needs to happen for the youth then to kind of break this cycle of violence?

Juliano: I think that the problem is that we don't have a very well organized lobby for peace or a very well organized lobby for disarmament or for, even for education. I think that one of the main challenges for the next government if Lula wins, is to be able to restart communicating directly with the population and emphasizing the necessity of organizing groups around more peaceful ideas and more peaceful realities, because change is not gonna come exclusively from the government. Change has to come from communities, especially where violence is more connected to a daily basis.

Gemma: Whether or not Lula wins the election and what happens after it, Erika Robb Larkins told me that Bolsonaro has ramped up a new type of political discourse in Brazil and it isn't going anywhere.

Erika: Which is one that's really framing the world as this polarized place. You know, where good people are being constantly attacked by enemies and you know, under threat. That kind of a mentality that there's oh, a sort of a war at play is not gonna go away with, let's say, a rollback of the access to guns. And so I think the answer here really is a question that is relevant for lots of places, which is what happens in these contexts of extreme political polarization and what is the way forward through those kinds of situations.

Gemma: You know, Dan, when I was speaking to Erika about this, her question here just really struck me about how countries can bring themselves back from extreme political polarization, and it's such a good question that I think we should go away and do a whole new episode trying to answer it.

Dan: Yeah, if you want to ask an important question and get an important answer, that's surely a good one.

Gemma: OK, well, we're gonna get onto that and have that hopefully ready in the next couple weeks. I should say, if you're interested in learning more about Brazil, we did an episode back in June 2021 about the militarization of Brazil's democracy, and I do recommend you go back and listen to that too because it was full of fascinating insights. We'll put a link to that in our show notes.

For this episode, we've got a couple of thanks to Roberta Maschietto at the University of Coimbra, who we also spoke to and to our Conversation colleague Daniel Stycer in Brazil for his help and guidance.

Dan: You can find us on Twitter TC_audio, instagram @theconversationdotcom or email us.If you like what we do, please support the podcast and the conversation more broadly. Go to donate.theconversation.com.

Gemma: This episode of The Conversation Weekly was produced by Mend Mariwany and me, Gemma Ware. I'm also the show's executive producer. Sound designer is by Eloise Stevens, and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl.

Dan: Stephen Khan is our global executive editor. Alice Mason runs our social media and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts. I'm Dan Merino. Thank you so much for listening.