

U.S. NEWS

# Why No One Wants to Back 'Smart Guns'

Startups struggle as Silicon Valley investors are shying away from investing in firearms

By ZUSHA ELINSON AND JOE PALAZZOLO

SAN FRANCISCO—It was supposed to be the dawn of a new era of "smart guns."

Spurred by the deaths of 20 young children in the 2012 Sandy Hook elementary school shooting, Silicon Valley set out to make safer, technologically advanced weapons that could only be fired by their owners.

Venture-capital luminary Ron Conway, known for his early investments in Google and PayPal, led the charge, raising millions for grants aimed at jump-starting the smart-gun industry.

Five years later, the smart gun has stalled in Silicon Valley. No smart gun has been brought to the market and most of the handful of startups are struggling. The Smart Tech Challenges Foundation, founded by Mr. Conway to give grants, brought national attention to the issue, but is now having trouble raising money.

The Florida high-school shooting that left 17 people dead in February has led to a renewed interest among activists and politicians to find ways to cut gun violence. Smart-gun evangelists hope to capitalize on the movement. But the firearms industry and now Silicon Valley investors have shied away from smart guns largely for political reasons.

"The gun industry is not fond of [the smart gun] because it's change, and Silicon Valley isn't

## Young Inventor Appears to Be Going It Alone

As a teenage engineering whiz, Kai Kloepfer was dubbed "the Mark Zuckerberg of guns" by venture capitalist Ron Conway for the handgun he invented with a fingerprint reader on the grip.

The now 21-year-old Mr. Kloepfer appears to be the only one moving forward—even as he majors in business and computer science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He made Forbes' "30 Under 30" list, but struggled at first to get private investment for his company Biofire Technologies.

Last year, Mr. Kloepfer secured funding from Mr. Conway and a few others. He is currently making hires, and hopes to raise more money and ship a product in 12 to 18 months.

fond of it because it's guns," said Jonathan Mossberg, former executive at shotgun maker O.F. Mossberg & Sons whose effort to put a smart gun into production has stalled.

For decades, firearms companies have refused to sell smart guns because of glitches in some early models, as well as a backlash from conservative gun-rights activists, who fear the technology will prompt state legislatures to mandate it broadly. The activists say their fears were confirmed by a 2002 New Jersey

Mr. Conway remains optimistic about Mr. Kloepfer, if not the Smart Tech Challenges Foundation, which raised \$15,000 in 2015 and not much more since then. "We awarded our grants, we picked our horses," he said.

Mr. Conway's push also spurred companies making less controversial gun-safety products such as biometric locks, one of which has a product on the market.

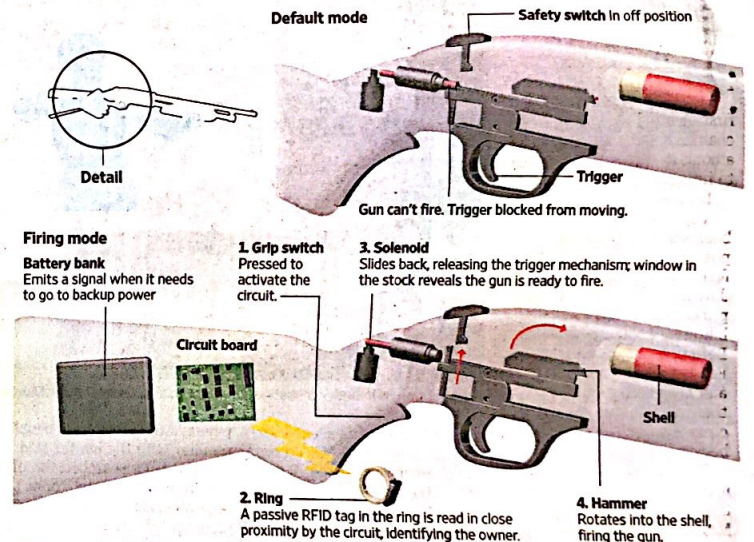
Gavin de Becker, a gun owner whose Los Angeles-based security firm protects prominent public figures, put more than \$100,000 into Biofire but lamented the state of the industry. "The very fact that we're talking about one person instead of hundreds of people backed by corporations shows the ridiculousness of the national position," said Mr. de Becker. "We're a country literally built on technological creativity and the best we've been able to put forth is a kid in Colorado in his garage."

law requiring all handguns for sale in the state to have smart-gun technology when it became available. Smith & Wesson's parent company said last month it was still wary of making smart guns.

In Silicon Valley, a place that revels in its role as a disrupter and innovator, the smart gun was stymied in part by liberal funders reluctant to put money behind any type of firearm. Potential investors also shied away after stores pulled a smart gun in response to death threats and calls for boy-

## For Your Hands Only

Several manufacturers have developed 'smart guns' that only allow the gun owners to fire them. One such weapon is the iGun, which was awarded \$100,000 from the Smart Tech foundation.



Source: Mossberg Group

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cotts—and because they viewed betting on hardware companies as too risky without a big-name entrepreneur.

Margot Hirsch, president of the Smart Tech foundation, said getting a smart gun to market is now "a question of when, not if," but acknowledged the hurdles. "We underestimated the challenges we would face in getting these technologies to market and funding them," she said.

The technology behind these guns isn't new. Prototypes have employed finger-

print readers like the iPhone's that can identify authorized users, or radio frequency identification bracelets or rings that activate the weapon the way that key fobs are used with push-button car ignitions.

A 2013 survey by the National Sport Shooting Foundation, the firearms industry group, found that 14% of Americans likely would buy a smart gun.

A 2016 survey by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, coming after a great deal of publicity around the Silicon Valley push, found

that 59% of Americans would be willing to purchase one.

In the NSSF survey, three-quarters of Americans said they were concerned about the reliability of battery-powered biometric or radio-frequency activation systems.

But in theory, a gun with a fingerprint reader or RFID technology might stop murderers like Adam Lanza who used guns in the Sandy Hook shooting purchased by his mother, and to a greater degree prevent accidental shootings and suicides.