

# OPINION

## One Nation, Under the Gun

### Leading the world in shootings

BY WILLIAM A. COLLINS

Following that dark opening-night screening of the latest Batman movie in Aurora, Colorado, it's time to contemplate yet again why America's troubled young



men kill so many more people than their counterparts in the rest of the world's more affluent nations. Most wealthy countries don't care much for handguns. They have better things to do. And in Europe, fading tribal memories dating back to the lawless Middle Ages have, at last, largely receded.

Americans are different. Our most hazardous epoch is more recent. Popular Western movies and TV dra-

mas refresh robust memories of the great frontier. While that heritage is fading, it still grips many of us. After all, our voluntary and involuntary immigrant ancestors were bold and strong. They survived death-defying trans-oceanic trips, some of them as cargo.

Perhaps our frontier complex can explain why so many Americans believe that to properly protect ourselves today, we need guns.

I don't get it. Reality has changed. If there's a Native-American menace today, it's casinos. Duels are out. Slavery ended 150 years ago.

But guns have sunk truly pernicious roots into our culture. In the

first half of 2011, nearly 700 Americans perished in murder-suicides. About 90 percent involved a firearm. Overall, we bump ourselves off at the rate of 30,000 per year using bullets. A total of 110,000 of us are killed or wounded. Plenty of those wounded are in bad shape too, with gunshot victims accounting for 15 percent of all spinal cord injuries.

The requirement for a background check reflects the desire by most governments to tamp down today's flood of guns and epidemic of shootings. The National Rifle Association, which is generously financed by the gun industry, strenuously opposes this civilized public safety policy. That dark duo has many supporters.

Take Alaska for example. Sixty

percent of Alaskan households own guns, and 20 out of every 100,000 Alaskans die annually from gunshots. In Hawaii, by contrast, only 10 percent of families own guns. And bullets kill just three out of every 100,000 Hawaiians each year.

Yet the dark duo still argues that the solution to too many gun deaths is to make sure that even more Americans obtain these deadly weapons. It has persuaded the U.S. House of Representatives to force states with restrictive handgun laws to honor concealed-weapons permits from Wild West states when their residents come to visit. Sort of like drivers licenses.

One state that won't care is Florida. In 2010, the Sunshine State prohibited local governments from

imposing any of their own restrictions at all on gun-toting, invalidating a host of existing municipal ordinances.

As usual, ironies abound, especially since Tampa has banned water pistols from the streets outside the upcoming Republican National Convention. Thus you will be able to pack real heat out there, but not your super soaker.

Fortunately, the Secret Service is in charge inside the venue. Especially after the Aurora massacre, the GOP faithful will be lucky to get in armed with nail clippers. They'll have to conduct their mayhem out front.

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## Pushing Children Out of School

### A losing proposition for children and society

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

In 1642m the Massachusetts General Court passed one of the very first laws about education in what would become the United States. Educating children well enough to read and understand the laws of the community was considered so critical that local selectmen were put in charge of making sure it was done—and they would be able to tell children hadn't been educated properly if they became "rude, stubborn & unruly."



For generations to come the power of education to develop good character and put young people on the right path remained a cornerstone of American thought about teaching our children. Building good citizens stayed right up there with reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic as a key goal of education and was one of the early justifications for providing public schools for all, as leaders continued to argue that if educating every child benefitted the whole community neglecting education was dangerous for everyone.

Thomas Jefferson, a strong advocate for expanding educational opportunity across classes (at least for whites), said in an 1818 letter: "If the children are untaught, their ignorance and vices will in future life cost us much dearer in their consequences than it would have done in their correction by a good education."

A few decades later education reformer Horace Mann, considered the "father" of the common school movement in America, made a similar point: "Jails and prisons are the complement of schools; so many less as you have of the latter, so many more must you have of the former."

For many more years teachers remained deeply respected community members who were often revered for being strong positive role models. This was considered especially critical when teachers were filling this role for children who otherwise might not be getting it at home.

But today something has changed. We still say all of the same kinds of things about the power good schools and teachers have to radically transform a child's chances in

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life. We've now measured the connection between how much education a child receives and future success. We know the dangers of dropping out, especially for the most vulnerable children and youths who have fewer high quality schools and resources than affluent children and fewer positive options for spending unsupervised time away from school.

Politicians and celebrities do public service ads urging children to stay in school. But as soon as a child gets in trouble, too often the very first thing schools do is to kick them out of class. I've never understood how it makes any sense, for example, to suspend or put a child out of school who is

absent, truant, or tardy and is not coming to school. Wouldn't it make more sense to find out why they are not coming to school?

Data released this spring by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights showed in 2009 that 6.9 percent of all students received at least one out-of-school suspension; the out-of-school suspension rate went up to 14.7 percent for black students.

The findings are even more troubling for the most serious school forms of discipline: Over 70 percent of students in-

calling the police and arresting them. Sometimes I think we adults have lost our common and moral sense!

Instead of educating children well enough so that they will not become "rude, stubborn, & unruly" we now reject them at the first sign of any disobedience using widely subjective catchall phrases and offenses like disrespectful or disruptive.

Most suspensions are for nonviolent offenses. Too many schools are pushing children into the juvenile and criminal justice systems to make them someone else's problem. It should be little surprise when so many of the same children who are punished by being pushed out of school go on to become the same ones who drop out and stay away for good.

It should be even less surprising when many of the young people who drop out are the same ones whose behavior we continue to complain about and fear and for whom we pay to build costly prison cells later. It's called the cradle to school to prison pipeline. States are spending on average two and a half times more per prisoner than per public school pupil. I think this is a very dumb investment policy which hurts children and the nation's future workforce.

If giving all children an education still benefits an entire community, and if not educating children still makes it more likely their future "ignorance and vices" will "cost us [dearly] in their consequences," every time a child is excluded from school by adults or is chronically absent without any actions to determine why, we are failing the child and undercutting the importance of education. Hundreds of years after Americans first made that connection, what will it take for us to get it again today?

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