

Opinion articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Portland Observer. We welcome reader essays, photos and story ideas. Submit to [news@portlandobserver.com](mailto:news@portlandobserver.com).

# OPINION

## Debunk the Myths that Guns Make Us Safe

### The massive human and moral cost of gun violence

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

The heartrending massacre of 20 first graders and six educators in Newtown, Conn. has galvanized public attention once again after a mass shooting.



But the killing of children by gun violence is not new. It has been a relentlessly unreported and under-reported plague that has snuffed out the lives of 119,079 children and teenagers since 1979. That's an average of 3,721 child and teen deaths every year for 32 years. That's 4,763 classrooms of 25 children each.

The number of children and teens killed by guns since 1979 is two and a half times greater than the number of U.S. military personnel killed in action in the Vietnam or Korean wars, and over 22 times greater than American military personnel killed in the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq.

The United States of America has spent a trillion and a half dollars on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars so far, purportedly to protect our children and citizens from enemies

without, while ignoring the reality that the greatest threats to child safety and well-being come from enemies within.

Gun violence saturates our children's lives and relentlessly threatens them every day. It has romped through their playgrounds; invaded their birthday parties; terrorized their Head Start classrooms, child care centers, and schools; frolicked down the streets they walk to and from school; danced through their school buses; waited at the red light and bus stop; lurked behind trees; run them down on the corner; shot them through their bedroom windows, on their front porches, and in their neighborhoods.

Gun violence has taught, entertained, and tantalized children incessantly across television, movie, and video game screens and the Internet. It has snatched away their parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters, friends, and teachers; sapped their energy and will to learn; and made them forget about tomorrow. It has nagged and picked at their child and youthful minds and spirits and darkened their dreams, day in and day out, snuffing out the promise and joy of childhood and inflicting them with post traumatic stress disorders — often chronic.

The violence from guns has caused children recurring nightmares and made them afraid to go

outdoors or to the movies. It has made them want to or feel they have to get a gun or join a gang to protect themselves because adults can't or won't protect them. It has made them plan their own funerals because they don't think they'll live to adulthood. It has killed them with guns every 3 hours and 15 minutes and injured them every 34 minutes. It terrifies them and makes them cry inside and wonder if and when enough adults are ever going to stand up and make it stop and make children safe.

President Obama, in his moving remarks at the Sandy Hook interfaith prayer vigil at Newtown High School on Dec. 16, 2012, got it right when he said: "Caring for our children. It's our first job. If we don't get that right, we don't get anything right. That's how, as a society, we will be judged."

We will not pass the test of the God of the prophets or New Testament or all great faiths if we do not protect all of our sacred children against repeated and preventable gun deaths and injuries. Every child has a right to live and to dream and to strive for a future that is not destroyed in a second because we cowered before a special interest lobby and refused to protect them.

What can we do? Learn the truth about and debunk the myths that guns make us safe. Did you know that one third of all households with children younger than 18 have a

gun and 40 percent of gun-owning households with children store their guns unlocked?

Contrary to what many people believe, having a gun in your home doesn't make you safer but instead endangers you and your loved ones. A gun in the home makes the likelihood of homicide three times higher, suicide three to five times higher, and accidental death four times higher. For every time a gun in the home injures or kills in self-defense, there are 11 completed and attempted gun suicides, seven criminal assaults and homicides with a gun, and four unintentional shooting deaths or injuries.

Read the Children's Defense Fund's new Protect Children Not Guns: The Truth About Guns, which debunks myths that guns make you safe. Convene congregational and parent and community study groups and let the enormity of lost child and human life sweep over you and pierce your hearts and make you determined to wake up, stand up and do something!

Small acts by enough of us can set off big ripples across our nation and shake up our political leaders. The important thing is to care and to act and to keep acting for as long as it takes. Stop shopping at stores that sell firearms over the counter — making their purchase and use as routine and normal as a flashlight or toaster.

Assault weapons should not be

normalized and treated as a household product or glorified as American as apple pie. Turn off the violent TV shows. Stop buying the violent toys and video games and call for nonviolent conflict resolution and restorative justice training of our educators, faith leaders, children, and all of us.

Let's make violence unacceptable rather than acceptable in our nation which leads the world's industrialized nations in military expenditures, in number of guns sold and in circulation (an estimated 300 million), and in child, youth, and adult civilian gun deaths.

What is it going to take for the American people, for you and for me, to push the President and members of Congress and Governors and state legislators to stand up to the National Rifle Association, gun manufacturers, and sellers?

What is it going to take for them to place protection of children and youths and adults ahead of the protection of guns and profits and their election to office? How much is a child's life worth in today's political economy in America?

As we celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday and the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington and the dream of our gun-slain prophet of nonviolence, let us truly hear and follow rather than just celebrate him.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.

## Important Protections Lost by Extremism

### What happened to the Violence Against Women Act?

BY LESLIE WATSON MALACHI

Democrats and Republicans in Congress are having a hard time agreeing on anything these days. But there are some things that should never fall victim to partisan bickering. One of these is protecting women against domestic violence and sexual assault.

But for Republicans in Congress, apparently, it isn't that simple. Thanks to the extremism of House Republicans, the Violence Against Women Act expired this month after 18 years of saving women's lives.

Here's how it happened. Back in April, the Senate passed a reauthorization of the act, which since 1994 has provided funding and training for state and local law enforcement to prevent domestic violence



and sexual assault. The law has worked incredibly well: between 1993 and 2010, the rate of intimate partner violence fell by 64 percent and the reporting of domestic violence has increased dramatically. Because of this, it has been reauthorized twice with overwhelming support from both Democrats and Republicans.

But at the start of this year, the act expired because House Republicans refused to reauthorize it. They refused even to hold a vote on it, instead proposing a watered-down bill that the president promised to veto. What they objected to were the new bill's increased protections for immigrants, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and Native American women.

Yes, they objected to greater protections for at-risk communities. Immigrant women are especially vulnerable to domestic violence because many rely on a spouse for their ability to live and work in this country. The new law would expand the number of victims of spousal abuse who could apply for their own visas and

start their own lives.

Similarly, LGBT people too often fall through the cracks of our safety net for domestic violence victims: they are turned away from shelters or denied support, simply because of the gender of the abuser and the abused. This law would fix that.

Finally, many Native American victims of domestic violence and sexual assault are left without recourse against non-Native abusers when their cases get lost in the gap between federal and tribal courts. This is no minor problem.

An astounding one in three Native women will survive a rape in her lifetime, and the vast majority of crimes against Native Americans are perpetrated by non-Natives. The Violence Against Women Act would bridge that legal gap and allow all Native American survivors of abuse to seek justice in court.

Republican efforts to prevent expanded protections for these at-risk groups made all women lose important protections. This issue is especially important to me as a survivor, an advocate, and a member of the

ministerial staff at an African-American congregation.

Violence against women is an issue that affects everyone in America, but it disproportionately impacts women of color.

The 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey found that more than a third of Hispanic women and nearly 44 percent of black women have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetimes.

As a faith leader — and as someone who worked with others to help enact this legislation in the first place — I feel that it is important to speak out in support of those who are most vulnerable to violence and abuse.

The lawmakers who blocked the Violence Against Women Act aren't just insulting victims of domestic abuse, they're actively putting women's lives in danger. Congress should act quickly in this New Year to reauthorize this life-saving program.

Minister Leslie Watson Malachi is the director for African-American Religious Affairs at People for the American Way.