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# OPINION

## What the NRA Doesn't Want You to Know

Ignorance or bliss is not sound policy



BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Why is the National Rifle Association so afraid of the truth? There are many misconceptions about guns and gun violence swirling around in Americans' minds—and in many cases, this misinformation is no accident.

For years the NRA has blocked the truth and actively fought against and prevented research in the causes and costs of gun violence because they don't want Americans to know the truth about guns, how to prevent gun violence, and how to make themselves and their children safer.

Why else would they have Congress pull gun injury prevention research funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health? Why have we put up so

long with efforts to block all research on a huge public health threat that injures and kills tens of thousands of Americans every year?

As Arthur Kellermann and Frederick Rivara write in the February 2013 Journal of the American Medical Association article "Silencing the Science on Gun Research": "What can be done to reduce the number of residents who die each year from firearms, currently more than 31,000 annually? The nation might be in a better position to act if medical and public health researchers had continued to study these issues as diligently as some of us did between 1985 and 1997." Instead, they note beginning in 1996 pro-gun members of Congress began mounting an all-out effort to eliminate any funding for research connected to gun injury prevention. And as Kellermann and Rivara explain, this continued refusal to fund any research isn't just an academic matter: "Injury prevention research can have real and last-

ing effects. Over the last 20 years, the number of Americans dying in motor vehicle crashes has decreased by 31 percent. Deaths from fires and drowning have been reduced even more, by 38 percent and 52 percent, respectively. This progress was achieved without banning automobiles, swimming pools, or matches. Instead, it came from translating research findings into effective interventions. Given the chance, could researchers achieve similar progress with firearm violence? It will not be possible to find out unless Congress rescinds its moratorium on firearm injury prevention research."

The concerted campaign to hide the truth and block research is finally facing new scrutiny and opposition. President Obama's proposed gun safety package would end the freeze on gun injury prevention research although the amounts requested are inadequate. Ignorance is not bliss or sensible or sound policy, and in the case of our national gun violence epidemic ignorance is actually fatal. We need to

make decisions based on the truth and counter the NRA misinformation that has been infecting our nation.

It's time to challenge and deflate NRA misinformation and recognize that it does not speak for most American gun owners or even the majority of its membership. For example, polling data shows that 85 percent of gun owners and 74 percent of NRA members support universal background checks—a policy position the NRA vehemently opposes now.

The NRA argues that background checks don't work. The reality is that criminal background checks do work and making them universal at the federal level would make them far more effective. Since its implementation in 1994, the Brady Law, which instituted a federal background check requirement for sales through licensed dealers, has denied 2.1 million applications to purchase a firearm. But its impact has been limited by the ability of criminals to access firearms through pri-

vate sales.

Another bit of misinformation from the NRA is that universal background checks will lead to a registry of gun owners. The Brady Law explicitly bans the creation of a gun owner registry, and under that law instant criminal background checks have been made on over 100 million gun sales in the last decade without leading to the formation of a gun registry.

Here again, misinformation has paralyzed effective gun safety protections. The vast majority of responsible gun owners support background checks because they know that the only people who will be negatively impacted are criminals and those who sell them firearms.

Please do your homework and decide for yourself. Let's break the NRA lock on the research door to learn and share the truth about the human, economic and public safety costs of gun violence in our nation. I believe the truth will set us free.

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

## Trayvon Martin Tragedy Still Stings

Adding salt to an open wound

BY BENJAMIN TODD JEALOUS

One year later, the Trayvon Martin tragedy still stings, and some people are still throwing salt on the open wound. Last month George Zimmerman's brother, Robert



Zimmerman, posted a tweet comparing Trayvon Martin to De'Marquis Elkins, 17-year-old black teenager charged with fatally shooting a one-year-old baby.

The tweet showed a photo of Elkins side by side with a photo of Martin, both making inappropriate gestures, with the caption "A picture speaks a thousand words. Any questions?"

Zimmerman's follow-up tweet read "Lib[eral] media [should] ask if

what these [two] black teens did [to] a [woman and her baby] is the reason [people] think blacks might [be] risky". The implication was that

Trayvon Martin's actions on the night he was murdered were equivalent to the killing of an innocent child.

This would be worrisome enough if it were just the opportunistic cry of a family embroiled in racial controversy. But this belief - that male "black teens" are inherently more likely to be criminals - is ingrained in our society. It has seeped into our institutions in the form of racial profiling, and too often it poisons the judgment of those who are supposed to protect us.

Last year I visited Sanford, Fla. in the wake of the Trayvon Martin case. The NAACP hosted a forum

where residents could report incidents of police abuse. A number of African American mothers alleged that their teenage sons had been profiled, abused or even assaulted by the police. I found that the attitude of the local police department toward "black teens" was uncomfortably similar to that of Robert Zimmerman.

But the fact is that 50 years after the Civil Rights Act, racial bias still runs rampant among law enforcement in this country. And Zimmerman's attitude infects an institution much more influential than the Sanford Police Department: the NYPD.

The New York Police Department is currently fighting a class-action lawsuit against their racially biased practice of "stop-and-frisk" policing. Stop-and-frisk allows officers to stop, question and physically

search any individual they consider suspicious. In 2011 NYPD officers stopped nearly 800,000 people for alleged "suspicious activity." Nine out of 10 were innocent, 99 percent did not have a gun - and nine out of 10 were black or Latino.

There's evidence that patrol officers may be encouraged to meet arrest quotas. A tape played at the trial reveals a supervising officer asking for "more 250s," or more stop-and-frisk forms. One plaintiff, a police officer, testified about the pressure he felt from supervisors - "they were very clear, it's non-negotiable, you're gonna do it, or you're gonna become a Pizza Hut delivery man."

Leaked recordings reveal that the NYPD has effectively placed a bounty on "black teens." By profiling young teens of color, they are using the same grisly logic as Robert Zimmerman. And the result is

apparent: in 2011, black and Latino men between the ages of 14 and 24 made up 42 percent of those targeted by stop-and-frisk. That group makes up less than 5 percent of the city's population.

The crime attributed to De'Marquis Elkins' was truly horrific and despicable. But Elkins does not represent an entire demographic, just like Adam Lanza did not act on behalf of all young white men.

Racial profiling punishes innocent individuals for the past actions of those who look and sound like them. It misdirects crucial resources and undercuts the trust needed between law enforcement and the communities they serve. It has no place in our national discourse, and no place in our nation's police departments.

Ben Jealous is president and chief executive officer of the NAACP.

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