

OPINION

Who Put the NRA in Charge of National Security?

Gun violence is a public health epidemic

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN



With the echo of gunshots from the San Bernardino massacre ricocheting across the country and another American community reeling with new broken hearts our national discussion of gun violence feels and sounds like a broken record stuck on one horrifying song that never ends.

The President expresses his outrage that these tragedies continue to happen and calls on the public to push Congress and state legislatures to do the right thing. Members of Congress release proposals without a clear timetable for a vote or a path to passage. Public support for gun safety measures swells. The gun lobby pushes back, accusing those who seek reform of politicizing tragedy while continuing their relentless work to loosen restrictions on the deadly weapons that continue the carnage. Broken families and communities struggle to pick up the pieces after the media leaves town. With too few exceptions nothing gets done and every day Americans not living in the immediately affected communities grow numb to the tragedy and continue their normal lives until the next mass shooting inevitably occurs and the cycle repeats itself.

These horrible mass shootings that destroy and shake up so many lives with ever-increasing frequency tell only part of the tragic cost of gun violence that pervades our cities and towns every single day across our nation. Violence romps through our children's playgrounds, terrifies them in their schools and child care centers, follows them down the street, and shoots through their bedroom windows. This should be the chief public health issue in America.

Data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control earlier this year show there was a death by a gun every 16 minutes and a child or teen was killed or injured by a gun every 30 minutes in 2013. More than 2,400 children and teens died from guns, enough to fill 122 classrooms of 20 children.

Why in God's name are we so reticent to stand up to the pro-gun lobby when American children are 18 times more likely to die by a gun than children in 25 other high income nations? Are we so spiritually dead that the killing of children has become routine and unimportant? Where is the faith community?

Lessons from America's public health history points us to what we can do now to stop the carnage. The public health approach to problem solving has been credited with a range of achievements, including adding 25 years to the life expectancy of people in the United States in the 20th century. One of the greatest victories of this approach has been a massive decline in automobile deaths. Few today can imagine getting in a car without an airbag, a seat belt, or a proper child safety seat. These safety devices and the laws we follow while on the road were not always in place—and American roadways were not always as safe as they are today. It took a

concentrated effort by researchers, policymakers, and the public to identify and address the root causes of the epidemic of motor vehicle deaths before the 1960s.

Recent gun violence prevention research should help point the way forward. A recent study found that a Connecticut law that expanded background checks to all handgun purchases helped achieve a 40 percent reduction in gun homicides during the first 10 years following the law's enactment. Another study reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association Internal Medicine found states with background checks on private as well as online gun sales had 16 percent lower gun fatality rates.

Polling consistently shows a vast majority of Americans, including a large majority of gun owners, support expanding background checks to cover all gun sales—yet Congress has not yet demonstrated its capacity to act on such a simple, life-saving measure. As a result guns can be purchased without background checks from unlicensed private

sellers and over the internet with no checks at all. It's way past time for citizens to retire members of Congress and state legislators who put gun manufacturer profits ahead of child, family, and human safety.

Some say that background checks alone will not prevent every gun tragedy and they won't, but they are a critically important step forward. We need more research on laws, other policies, and technologies that might save more lives. Proposals to require background checks for ammunition sales, impose a tax on ammunition, require liability insurance for guns, and smart gun technologies all merit immediate attention. Sadly, the National Rifle Association, other members of the gun lobby, and their cowardly allies in Congress and in many state legislatures have barred the CDC from conducting research and sharing the truth about the impact of on gun violence on our nation's public health since the mid-1990's and imposed similar restrictions on the National Institutes of Health in 2011 due to

fears that research might show concrete ways to reduce its deadly impacts.

Why is the NRA afraid of the truth? Is it because they fear the research may show concrete ways to reduce the impact of guns which sapped 33,169 lives in America in 2013 and injured 83,075 yet remain the only unregulated consumer product? It makes no sense to regulate toy guns which kill not a single person and let real guns which should only be in the hands of the military kill tens of thousands annually. We should protect human beings rather than guns. Might not the truth make us all safer?

It's way past time for the American people to retire the NRA as our head of national security and public health and assure the safety of our children and families everywhere in America. Only then can we reclaim our nation's soul and affirm our commitment to the sanctity of life for all.

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