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Opinion

Dallas Tragedy Debunks Anti-Gun Control Myths

“We can’t tolerate this anymore. These tragedies must end. And to end them, we must change. We will be told that the causes of such violence are complex, and that is true. No single law – no set of laws can eliminate evil from the world, or prevent every senseless act of violence in our society. But that can’t be an excuse for inaction. Surely, we can do better than this.” – President Barack Obama, Sandy Hook Interfaith Prayer Vigil, 2012

One of the more unsettling revelations about the tragedy in Dallas is that the mentally unbalanced gunman was rejected, after a background check, for membership in an extremist group, but was legally able to purchase a high-capacity assault rifle.

According to media reports, Micah Johnson was labeled “unfit for recruitment” among a network of extremist groups, including some designated as “hate groups” by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Yet within months of that rejection, Johnson was able to meet in a parking lot with a gun seller he contacted online, and take possession of a military weapon designed to slaughter human beings as quickly and efficiently as pos-

**Marc H. Morial**President &
CEO National
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sible.

In what kind of a world do we live when hate groups that actually encourage violence against law enforcement officers are more circumspect than our current firearm safety laws?

“The man who sold Johnson the AK-47 said Johnson appeared normal during their 15-minute meeting

The man who sold Johnson the AK-47 said Johnson appeared normal during their 15-minute meeting – as though dangerous mental instability is written across someone’s face.

“It’s my belief he would have passed a background check,” the man said. But it wouldn’t have mattered, not in Texas. Federal law requires only licensed gun dealers to conduct background checks. Millions of guns are sold each year online or at gun shows through private sellers. Fel-

ons, domestic abusers, the violently mentally ill are able to acquire firearms and the law does nothing to stop them.

More than 90 percent of Americans support universal background checks. Legally-required background checks have blocked more than two million gun sales to dangerous people since the system was instituted.

Maybe Micah Johnson’s background would have slipped past the system. Seung-Hui Cho, who killed 32 people and wounded 17 on the Virginia Tech campus in 2007,

was banned from buying guns because a court found him severely mentally ill. But he passed a background check, because his records never made it into the system.

Prior to the attack in Dallas, each mass-shooting incident in the United States has prompted a bizarre chorus calling for even more guns in our society. “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun,” as the saying goes. Setting aside the impossibility of dis-

tinguishing a “good guy” from a “bad guy,” there were plenty of people with guns at the scene of the Dallas massacre and not one of them was able to stop the sniper. The police were armed. About 30 of the marchers at the demonstration where the attack took place were armed. Not one of them managed to stop Micah Johnson with a gun.

Every modern study concludes that more guns equal more crime. Right-to-carry laws are associated with significantly higher rates of aggravated assault, robbery, rape and murder. American children are sixteen times more likely than children that live in other high-income countries to be killed in gun accidents, with as many as 100 children dying each year.

Our firearm safety system is broken – tragically, fatally broken. Lobbyists for the firearm industry hold our lawmakers in an almost literal death grip, blocking common sense reform at every turn. Call your U.S. Congress members and demand action on gun violence. Learn the truth about gun violence in America and educate your friends and family. And work for a nation that puts the safety of its citizens ahead of profits for the gun industry.

Intellectual Honesty About Race and Criminal Justice Reform

There is an old adage that posits “The more things appear to change, the more they stay the same.”

Once again, millions of Americans are engulfed in what has become a reluctant national debate and dialogue concerning race and the urgency to reform the nation’s criminal justice system. Finding and identifying transformative remedies and solutions are long overdue.

In the wake of the most recent fatal tragedies in Dallas, Minneapolis, and Baton Rouge, there are renewed fervent calls for improving relations between police officers and the communities they are sworn to protect and serve. I believe these calls are being made in earnest, seeking conclusive change.

However, the underlying systemic reasons why these and other tragedies continue to happen are somehow routinely avoided. There is a pervasive fear to speak and articulate the truth about race and the institutionalized devolving impact of racism on all levels of the criminal justice system.

To put it bluntly, there is too much intellectual dishonesty concerning the historical and contemporary role of race in America. In particular we

**Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.**NNPA
President
and CEO

need more intellectual honesty about why and how real reform of the criminal justice system should be achieved.

We need remedies that actually work to enable and to

“There is a pervasive fear to speak and articulate the truth about race and the institutionalized devolving impact of racism on all levels of the criminal justice system

empower people to improve their quality of life without the debilitating and too often death-rendering consequences of a broken criminal justice system. Mass incarceration, prosecutorial misconduct, judicial inequality, racial profiling, and police brutality are all interrelated and interconnected in the counterproductive web of the system named criminal justice.

It is a system that lacks honesty, truth and integrity. Yet, my purpose here is to go beyond merely joining the

public chorus that bemoans the prolonged contradictions of this failed social system. I know that there are some preventative programs and initiatives that are producing positive results about which more people should be made aware.

Criminal justice reform requires the coordinated and combined efforts and support of principled leaders in the private sector along with government officials, communi-

ty organizations, and family members who are impacted. We should also acknowledge that poverty and economic insecurity feeds the pipeline to the jails and prisons in the United States.

Acquiring a good education and training that provide a means of generating a sustainable income are also key factors that are necessary, if reform of our system of justice is to be productive. Last year in Baton Rouge, ironically, I was pleased to be on a panel about criminal justice

reform at the 57th national convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) founded by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We discussed the need for re-entry programs for the thousands of ex-offenders who are returning to our communities across the nation.

One such program I want to highlight, Project JumpStart in Baltimore, Md., is an effective and efficient model to reforming an important aspect of the criminal justice system: offender re-entry workforce development. The construction trades are a growing skilled-workers industry in most urban areas where there are high-paying job opportunities.

JumpStart is Baltimore’s premier construction training program. It is a 14-week skills training program in plumbing, carpentry and the electrical trade. Trainees also receive financial literacy coaching as well as practical courses in mathematics as it relates to the construction industry. More than 70 percent of the trainees actually go on to attain apprenticeships, licenses, and high-wage jobs.

Read the rest of this commentary at
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