

Sandy Hook and the Shameful Epidemic

By Bill Durston, M.D.

Our country is reacting with shock, horror, and grief to yet another mass shooting – this time, at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, where 20 elementary school children and six adults were killed by a lone gunman. We should be shocked. We should be horrified. We should grieve for the victims and their families. And, as a country, we should be ashamed.

Every year, more than 30,000 U.S. civilians are killed by guns. Children in the United States are killed by guns at a rate that is 12 times higher than in the other leading 25 industrialized countries of the world. Gunshot wounds are the second leading cause of death in children in the United States, just behind motor vehicle crashes. The Connecticut shooting evokes memories of the 1989 Cleveland Elementary School shooting in Stockton, California, in which 5 children were killed and 29 wounded; the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado, in which 13 students and teachers were killed and 24 wounded; and the 2007 Virginia tech shooting in which 32 people were killed and 17 wounded.

Between July 1, 1994 and June 30, 1999, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control reported that there were 220 separate shooting incidents on high school campuses across the United States, with 253 deaths. The report concluded that school-related shootings were “rare.” The Canadian press commented that it was “uniquely American” to regard 220 separate high school shooting incidents in 5 years as “rare.”

The single factor which most clearly distinguishes the United States from other democratic, industrialized countries that have far less gun violence is the easy availability of guns in our country. We should be ashamed that we have not adopted the same kind of sensible gun control laws as in those other countries which put the onus on the gun owner to show why he needs a gun, not on society to prove that he shouldn't have one. We should also be ashamed of the glorification of gun violence in our popular media and of the perpetration of the myth that honest citizens should have guns for protection when there is overwhelming evidence that guns in our homes and in our communities are far more likely to be used to kill innocent civilians than to protect them.

We should be ashamed of our elected leaders who, with few exceptions, lack the political courage to even talk about gun control. One such exception is California State Senator Dianne Feinstein who co-authored the 1994 Federal Assault Weapons Ban. In 1996, though, after the CDC reported the shockingly high rate of gun-related deaths for U.S. children, Congress cut funding for the CDC's gun violence research. In 2004, Congress let the assault weapons ban lapse, and in 2005, Congress passed a bill giving special immunity to gun makers and dealers from products liability lawsuits. Even after Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was critically wounded in a mass shooting in January of 2011, Congress failed to take any action to prevent future mass shootings.

The current majority on the Supreme Court should be ashamed of itself for essentially re-writing the Second Amendment. In 1939, The Supreme Court ruled in the case of *U.S. versus Miller* that the Second Amendment, which begins with the phrase, “A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state,” guarantees a collective right of the people to maintain armed state militias, such as the current day National Guard, but not an individual right to own guns. The late Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger stated that the misrepresentation of the Second Amendment as guaranteeing an individual right to own guns was “one of the biggest pieces of fraud on the American people” that he had seen in his lifetime. Shamefully, the current Supreme Court became a party to that fraud when it ruled in a 5-4 decision in 2008 that the District of Columbia’s ban on private ownership of handguns violated the Second Amendment.

The American Academy of Pediatrics took the position in 2000 that firearm regulations, to include bans on handguns and assault weapons, are the best way to prevent firearm deaths and injuries. Had Congress passed such a ban, and had the U.S. Supreme Court not engaged in a fraudulent re-interpretation of the Second Amendment, it is almost certain that the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School would never have occurred. In the absence of anything short of a ban on handguns and assault weapons, it is not predictable when and where the next mass shootings will occur, but it is certain that they will continue to occur.

It is past time for our country to stop the shameful epidemic of gun violence. It is time for us to adopt comprehensive gun control laws that show that we love our children more than our guns.

Note about the author: Dr. Durston is an emergency physician practicing in Sacramento, California. He is also a Marine Corps combat veteran and former expert marksman, decorated for courage under fire in Vietnam. Dr. Durston is the Vice-President and the High School Scholarship Essay Contest chairperson for the Sacramento Chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility.