

The Shameful Epidemic – Gun Violence in the USA

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In an article written in 1992, the President of the American College of Emergency Physicians, Dr. Jack Allison, referred to gun violence in the United States as a “shameful epidemic.” On April 16, 2007, 32 students and faculty at Virginia Tech were killed in this ongoing epidemic. Scores more suffered serious non-fatal physical injuries, and untold others suffered psychological trauma, including devastating losses on the part of the friends and family members of those killed.

Dr. Allison used the word “shameful” in referring to the fact that we, as a country, have not taken definitive steps to curb the preventable epidemic of gun violence. It is easy for U.S. citizens and their leaders to condemn the shooters with adjectives such as “heinous” or “deranged.” It is not so easy to acknowledge that while there are disturbed people in other democratic, industrialized countries, the epidemic of gun violence is unique to the United States of America.

The mass shooting at Virginia Tech was the most deadly in a long series of mass shootings in schools, workplaces, and other public settings in the United States. After each mass shooting, U.S. citizens have typically reacted with shock, sorrow, and disbelief, repeatedly asking themselves, “Why?” Citizens of other democratic, industrialized countries also react with shock and sorrow when they learn of mass shootings in the United States, but not with disbelief. For people who live in other civilized countries that don’t have repeated mass shootings, the answer to the question, “Why,” is obvious. It’s the guns. The single factor that most clearly distinguishes the U.S. from other countries that have much lower rates of gun violence is the widespread availability of firearms in the United States.

High profile mass shootings are only the tip of the iceberg of gun-related deaths and injuries in the United States. Every year, approximately 30,000 U.S. civilians are killed by guns. The number of U.S. civilians killed annually by guns is ten times the number of people killed in the September 11 terrorist attacks. More U.S. civilians are killed by guns every two years than the total number of U.S. soldiers killed in the entire 11 year Vietnam War.

Gunshot wounds are the second leading cause of death for children ages 10-19 in the United States, with only motor vehicle accidents taking a higher toll. A child in the United States is far more likely to catch a bullet than the measles. The homicide rate for U.S. males ages 15-24 is more than ten times higher than in most other developed countries. The much higher rate of gun violence in the United States as compared with other democratic countries corresponds with a much higher rate of firearm ownership in the U.S. and much less stringent gun control laws.

Following the publication of Dr. Allison's 1992 "Shameful Epidemic" article, Congress did take two important steps to address the epidemic of gun violence in the United States. The federal Brady Act, requiring background checks for most gun purchasers, and the federal Assault Weapons Ban were both enacted in 1994. Over the following decade, there was a 28% decline in the number of gun-related deaths in the United States.

In more recent years, though, the federal government's approach to the ongoing epidemic of gun violence has been no less than shameful. In 1997, the Centers for Disease Control advocated more stringent gun control laws after publishing a study showing that children under the age of 15 in the United States were 12 times more likely to be killed by guns than children in the other leading 25 industrialized countries of the world. Congress reacted by cutting the CDC's funding for research on firearm-related issues and by placing a permanent ban on the use of federal funding for research advocating gun control.

In the eight years since the mass shooting at Columbine High School, Congress has enacted no significant new gun control laws. On the contrary, in 2004 Congress and the President let the federal Assault Weapons Ban expire. In 2005, with litigation pending against a gun store that claimed to have "lost" more 150 than military-style rifles, including the one suspected of being sold illegally to the DC snipers, Congress passed legislation giving special protection to gun makers and gun dealers from lawsuits.

Equally shameful are the myths perpetuated by the gun industry and its associated lobby, the National Rifle Association. These myths include:

Myth #1 - The United States owes its democratic freedoms to an armed citizenry.

Fact – Most of the guns used in the American Revolution were imported from France at the beginning of the war, and most men who fought in the revolution turned their guns back in after the war was over. We owe our democratic freedoms to the fact that our forefathers retained their principles, not their guns.

Myth #2 – The Second Amendment to the United States guarantees an individual "right to bear arms."

Fact – The U. S. Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that the Second Amendment, which begins with the phrase, "A well regulated militia," confers a collective right of the states to maintained armed militias, such as the current day National Guard, not an individual right of each and every citizen to own guns. The late U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger, speaking of the gun lobby's misrepresentation of the Second Amendment, stated, "This has been the subject of one of the greatest pieces of fraud on the American public by special interests that I have ever seen in my lifetime."

Myth #3 – Honest citizens should own guns for protection.

Fact – Guns in the homes of honest citizens are much more likely to be used to kill themselves and their family members than to protect against an attacker. In one of the

best studies on this subject, it was shown that for every one time a gun in the home was used to kill an attacker, there were 43 gun-related deaths of a household member.

The United States has been criticized as a country that loves its guns more than its children. There is no doubt that the students and the faculty members killed in the recent Virginia Tech massacre were dearly loved by those who knew them. But will we as a country be moved enough by the Virginia Tech tragedy to take definitive steps to reduce the chances of other similar tragedies recurring in the near future? It would be shameful if we did not.

To protect our youth, and ourselves, we should demand rapid enactment of gun control legislation in the United States similar to the regulations in other democratic countries that have much lower rates of gun violence but that still allow legitimate hunters and target shooters to practice their sports. This legislation should include licensing and registration of all firearms; renewal and strengthening of the federal assault weapons ban; repeal of special protections for gun makers and gun dealers; and strict regulations on the sale of handguns. If we do not adopt such regulations, when the next mass shooting occurs, there is no point in asking why the tragedy occurred, but only why we allow the shameful epidemic to continue.

About the Author: Dr. Bill Durston is a USMC combat veteran of Vietnam and a former expert marksman in the Marines. He is an emergency physician and past president of the Sacramento Chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility.