

Beyond Gun Control

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To open, I have no problem with rational controls on the purchase, possession and carrying of firearms. I will stipulate to the fact that some gun violence is no doubt due to the ready availability of guns. However, to be clear, a gun is nothing more or less than a mechanism. A mechanism designed to threaten, injure or kill, but a mechanism nonetheless. It is an inert metal artifact devoid of meaning except that which one imposes on it. Thus, many meanings, both good and bad, attach to guns.

I think that gun control efforts are, for the most part, confusing means with causes. It is, in my view, analogous to thinking that the obesity epidemic can be solved by taxing certain foods or that drug abuse can be stopped by criminalizing drugs. From my experience, gun controls, food taxes and drug laws will not and have not stopped violence, obesity or drug abuse.

So, why do we pursue such strategies? Because they are easy targets. It is like the proverbial drunk who has lost his keys and is searching for them under a street light because he can see better there. The real solution is much more complex and therefore more difficult and expensive to accomplish. The most important question to ask in all these cases is why? Why is someone violent? Why is someone obese? Why does someone abuse a drug? The answer is never simple and seldom the same across cases.

I accept that there very well may be some commonalities among perpetrators of gun violence, and easy access to guns might be one of them. A commonality that I think that has just as much if not considerably more influence on gun violence is being socialized in a culture that is grounded in violence. At least in my lifetime, which is inclusive of the majority of living Americans, this country has been poised on the edge of violent confrontation or actually at war. Our history is replete with violence, beginning with the genocide perpetrated against indigenous people for our own advantage and the enslavement of millions of people to exploit the land and resources that we took from and are still taking from indigenous people. Our country has the largest military in the world. We spend more on arms than any other country in the world. We sell more arms to other countries than any other country in the world, including to some countries that we know do not want them purely for defensive purposes. We also have the highest rates of personal violence of any other developed country. We have the highest proportion of our population incarcerated than any other developed country. Our entertainment media are satu-

rated with glorified violence. Granted, some of this has elicited moral outrage and produced improved behavior at times, but one should not be in the position of having “good” behavior motivated by a guilty conscience. Further, I don’t doubt that this country has done some positive things in the world, but they are far outnumbered by our less than righteous behavior. We are masters at antagonizing other peoples and then blaming them for resisting our goals.

Let’s return to the more immediate issue of gun violence, Several years ago some statisticians looked at the probabilities for various outcomes in the U.S. One question they asked was where is an adolescent or young adult most likely to be murdered, which often means shot to death? The expected answer was in an inner city ghetto of a major city. The actual answer was in rural areas in the western U.S. While they listed a number of factors that were associated with this unexpected outcome, an important factor was the cultural expectation that to be a “man” one must handle one’s own problems. In most cases, “handle” meant to seek and achieve retribution or revenge for a perceived wrong.

The above example illustrates the complexity of dealing with gun violence. Many factors appeared to contribute to the use of violence to “handle” wrongs. Availability of firearms was one factor but so too were cultural expectations that endorse violent solutions. In addition, these two factors were accompanied by other setting factors such as lack of community cohesion, economic stress, little or no law enforcement presence and alcohol abuse. What happens if you leave all these factors in place and make guns more difficult to obtain? Probably there is some reduction in gun violence, but violence can be perpetrated by far too many means to ever control by trying to eliminate the means. If not with guns, violence can be accomplished with fists, clubs, knives, poisons, explosives, fire bombs and even automobiles. The list is not inclusive by any means. I can recall examples of individual and multiple deaths affected through all of these means in this country during my lifetime.

In the case of school shootings that seem to spark the most fervor about gun control, I would suggest that school culture as a setting factors is just as important, if not more important, than the availability of guns. A school culture that permits or ignores threat, intimidation, humiliation, coercion and physical violence won’t be solved by gun control. A school curriculum that fails to motivate and engage every student in learning perceived as meaningful to the student won’t be solved by gun control. A school that fails to provide access to adequate services for students with difficulties, whether related to learning or behavior, won’t be solved by gun control. Gun control is merely one small component in the larger task at hand.

In conclusion, I would suggest that the issue will not be an easy one to resolve. It will not be easy because in the final analysis both sides are largely driven by fear. Gun control advocates, at root, feel threatened by civilians with guns. Gun rights advocates feel threatened by a range of phenomena and seek security through guns. When fear motivates both sides in an argument, rational discussion is unlikely to prevail. Thus, the debate becomes a power struggle to see who can impose its will on whom. Not a recipe for a congenial social order.