

GUN CONTROL

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It has become a scene that is all too common in America. News reels with crying mothers, a shattered community and a lingering sense of terror and anxiety. A veritable plague of shootings continues to tear apart our nation.

As our country mourns the lives lost in El Paso, Dayton and Midland - at the hands of chaotic vengeful madmen, citizens are left wondering what if anything can be done to curb these terrifying senseless acts. Many will call for tighter controls on firearms and in the effort to satiate the demands of their constituents, politicians looking to score points for the next election cycle will craft legislation adding layers of new laws on top of the some 2,000 existing gun laws in place across the nation. The clamoring to do something is understandable and those affected deserve to not only be heard but see tangible steps taken to fix a nation being ripped apart by the chaotic actions of mad men.

The dialogue unfortunately, will not probe any deeper than the surface. The talking heads, fighting for ratings won't spend much time asking why this is happening, why these men chose to murder innocent people. The left will push to ban firearms and the right will undoubtedly push back, but few if any will take the time to question the underlying social, psychological and moral conditions that sit under the surface and could be key to addressing this pandemic.

Firearms are part of America. Firearms are not new in the US and throughout most of our history, they have been readily available for legal purchase. There are more restrictions on firearms today than there were forty or fifty years ago. In the 50's - one could purchase a rifle from a mail order catalogue. So we should be asking ourselves, what else has changed?

What societal factors, policies and trends have occurred that correlate with the ever-increasing frequency of mass shootings in the United States. Firearms have been prevalent throughout American history and were much more accessible historically than they are today. Mass shootings are a relatively new social crisis that does not consistently correlate or trend with the proliferation of firearms.

First and foremost, we have to admit to ourselves that gun free zones have not worked. In fact, the opposite is true. The vast majority of mass shootings have occurred in gun free zones. Several assailants have specifically noted in their manifestos that they chose these locations because they are soft and they can inflict the most carnage before there is a response.

Second, we should thoroughly investigate the state of our public mental health programs. The men and women who commit these heinous acts are not well. There are often signs or a history of mental health problems. According to research completed by the "Mother Jones" web site, over 50% of all mass shooters have had documented mental health issues. Another 20% may have displayed signs of serious mental illness.

From, 1970 to today, there has been a 74% reduction in the number of inpatients in public mental care facilities. This is not due to a decrease in the number of patients requiring treatment and care, but to an ever decreasing allocation of funding towards public mental care. The process of deinstitutionalization began in the 1950's and was accelerated in the mid 1960's. Since then, nearly 90% of individuals that would have been treated in a public mental health facility were left without care. Nearly 800,000 people with severe issues that would have been in a 24x7 treatment facility are being left to navigate the world - often on their own.

The timing of the decommissioning of our mental health system closely correlates with the timeline of mass shootings in the United States.

To compound this issue, psychoactive drugs such as Ritalin, Adderall, SSRIs and others are being prescribed at ever accelerating rates. Between 1990 and 2010, the number of prescriptions for these potent chemicals increased fourfold and when plotted and regressed against the trend of mass shooting, correlates highly with the upward trend in mass shootings. Production of these chemical compounds has increased by a factor of 10 over the same time. Four times the number of prescriptions are written in the US than: The UK, Australia, Spain and most other developed nations. It should also be noted that these chemicals have known side effects such as paranoid delusions and violent outbursts.

Correlation does not inherently indicate causation, but the trend cannot be ignored and needs to be thoroughly researched. The impact of these chemicals on minds that are not yet fully developed needs to be re-evaluated. This may be a symptom of our lack of available psychiatric care as doctors only tool becomes their prescription pad.

Children with broken homes, those that have experienced severe neglect or childhood trauma are more likely than others to lash out in a violent outburst – killing and maiming innocent people. Our social structures are failing us here. Communities are less connected, single parents are working two jobs and many children are left to fend for themselves in a world that is often confusing and cruel. Many of these children will have symptoms that could have indicated that there was a child in need of help. Symptoms such as anxiety, mood swings, fist fights and self-harming – are often ignored. This creates the opportunity for social contagion to set in and steer someone in the wrong direction.

Social contagion can be an extremely strong force. Impressionable minds see news headlines and seek to mimic behaviors. The bombardment of 24 hour news, always on social media and chat rooms can feed an idea and make it seem not only rational but the popular thing to do. The movie "Heathers" is an example of this concept. When the most popular girl in school commits suicide, other kids in the school begin to do the same. It becomes not only acceptable but the popular thing to do. Mark David Chapman, the man who killed John Lennon was asked why he did it. He responded that he wanted to be important. When the primary influences on a person become television and social media and there is no-one there to help damper the influence, an impressionable mind can be lead to believe that worst possible scenario as the only way of being someone and be seen by the world.

My plead to all of our legislators, to our families, friends, the media and every citizen of our country is to think about not just what is happening, but why? What are the societal trends? What emotions are driving people to commit these terrible crimes? That is the only way we will ever find a solution.

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