

# Gun violence requires better prevention

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Letters from Academia

In the last few weeks we have seen an impressive mobilization by our nation's high school students to tackle one of the most nefarious political issues that affects this country: gun violence. Many people question whether anything can be done about it given the power that lobbyists, most notably from the National Rifle Association, have over cowardly politicians. Yet, that does not mean that we lack information about what we need to do to stop this epidemic.

In a study published just a few days ago by the Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence titled, "Call for Action to Prevent Gun Violence in the United States of America," researchers of the Melissa Institute for Violence Prevention and Treatment, a Florida-based, non-profit organization dedicated to the study and prevention of violence, provided guidelines to reduce gun violence while at the same time protecting Constitutional rights.

The report recommends the following steps:

1. A national requirement for all schools to assess school climate and maintain safe conditions and positive school environments that protect against bullying, discrimination, harassment, and assault.

2. A ban on assault-style weapons, high-capacity ammunition clips, and products that modify semiautomatic firearms to enable them to function like automatic firearms.

3. Adequate staffing (counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers) of schools to provide mental health services for individuals with risk factors for violence, recognizing that violence is not intrinsically a product of mental illness.

4. Reform of school discipline to reduce exclusionary practices and foster positive social, behavioral, emotional, and aca-

demic success for students.

5. Universal background checks to screen out violent offenders, persons who have been hospitalized for violence towards self or others, and persons on no-fly, terrorist watch lists.

6. A national program to train and maintain school- and community-based threat assessment teams that include mental health and law enforcement partners including

practical channels of communication for persons to report potential threats as well as interventions to resolve conflicts and assist troubled individuals.

7. Removal of legal barriers to sharing safety-related information among educational, mental health, and law enforcement agencies in cases where a person has threatened violence.

8. Laws that allow courts to issue time-limited restraining orders requiring that firearms be recovered by law enforcement when there is evidence that an individual is planning to carry out acts against others or against themselves.

The question remains as to why we have witnessed such an increase in gun incidents lately?

Since the 2008 election of President Obama, the number of firearms manufactured in the U.S. has tripled and the number of imported firearms has doubled. One reason for the dramatic increase has been the intense media campaign by right wing groups falsely saying, "Obama is coming to take away your guns." Yet, the percentage of households that own

firearms has remained fairly stable – at about 50 percent – according to the Injury Control Research Center at Harvard University. How is this explained? Simple. Those who already owned guns have been stockpiling more and more of them. But who are these people?

According to several studies, they are mostly less-educated, conservative, anti-government white males anxious about their ability to protect their families (despite the national decline in violent crime), who are insecure about their place in the national economy and plagued by racial fears. These are people whose insecurity makes them feel that they need to become heroes of a certain sort. In other words, guns make them feel more empowered.

While studies like these are key to better understanding the problem, the NRA through fear tactics has influenced the political establishment to discount altogether scientific research on gun violence.

For example, earlier this month the RAND Corporation released a comprehensive analysis on gun policy in the U.S. and concluded that too few policies and outcomes have been the subject of rigorous scientific research.

But that was not always the case. For example, until 1996 the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) supported research on firearm violence through its National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Then came the "Dickey Amendment" that year, which prohibited the CDC from funding activities that promoted or advocated for gun control. Later, in 2011, Congress enacted similar restrictions affecting the Department of Health and Human Services, resulting in the absence of scientific research on any aspect of the availability and possession of firearms and the violence that might be related to them.

After the tragic shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2013, President Obama moved to lift those restrictions on research. But when the CDC requested funds to support relevant gun-related research, Congress, which must approve the federal budget, consistently said "no." Something similar happened with The National Institutes of Health when they tried to fund related research. And in the current anti-science, anti-intellectualism environment that we have in government and politics, these obstacles are not likely to go away.

Thus, fundamental research that can provide clear answers to questions such as the effectiveness of raising the minimum age for purchasing firearms to 21 years old, social factors affecting proclivity to gun violence, or the effectiveness of arming school officials, is less likely to take place.

Certainly, there are many people who fear that the answers to those questions will contradict their talking points, such as "the only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." We all must sometimes face inconvenient truths.

It is time to remove the despicable influence of ideologies on research about the fundamental problems that affect the U.S. And, to that end, we need to elect officials less prone to be influenced by money from lobbyists and special interests and who are more inclined to listen to reason.

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