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Mass Shootings, Gun Control, and Mental Health in America

Gun Control is a hotly debated topic in today’s political climate. There are two distinct sides to the argument, one that suggests that America would be a safer place by banning guns for its citizens, and one that suggests that the problem is not the guns but instead is the accessibility to guns given to people with clear undiagnosed mental illnesses. I believe in the latter statement. America is not a dangerous place due to its citizens owning guns. On the contrary, due to the fact there are over 300 million people in the united states and only 624,000 police officers, the need for citizens to have firearms to protect themselves from criminals is paramount. Mass shootings occur at a drastically higher rate in areas where gun laws are stricter than less regulated areas. The issue of mass shootings is not one of gun control but one of the mental health systems that refuses to acknowledge that undiagnosed mental illness in these offenders is the clear cause of their abominable acts.

I first want to examine the current state of gun control in the United States and the background check system. The background check system used in the United States is called the NCIS, or National Instant Criminal Background Check System. This system was mandated by the Brady Law in 1993 and launched officially by the FBI in 1998. This is the database that keeps records of every citizen who is ineligible to purchase a firearm due to criminal backgrounds, mental institutionalization, or specific FBI lists. According to Robert J Spitzerm author of *The Politics of Gun Control,* “Prior to 2005, only twenty-two states submitted mental health records to the NICS for federal background checks.” The NICS may be a federal program, but the laws on gun control and mental health are dealt with at the state level. Before 2005, a mentally ill person living in Virginia could have purchased a firearm legally, whereas a mentally ill person living in Georgia could not have. This is not something that should be ignored by over half the states in the country. As of today, according to Becki Goggins and Shauna Strickland, only 36 states submit 100% of firearm background checks to the FBI. I believe that the failure of the government to mandate all background checks for firearms to be run by the FBI is a huge mistake, and one that should be acknowledged as one and dealt with. However, I do not agree that banning the sale of firearms to able law-abiding citizens in addition to those mentally ill that use them for such egregious acts is the solution. To illustrate this, I will present you with facts about gun control that you may not know and have therefore come to a conclusion that banning firearms would be good for the nation.

The Daily Wire published an article authored by Aaron Bandler that detailed seven different gun crime facts that illustrate why gun control does not work the way people expect it to. One of the best points is that in places such as Australia or Great Britain, which people on the opposing side of gun-control often site to illustrate that gun control does work, actually have experienced significant homicide increases since banning guns. In Britain especially, where according to Bandler, “there was an 89 percent spike in gun crime from 1998/1999, to 2008/2009, all of which occurred after the gun ban.” The next point in the list is that “the vast majority of mass shootings occur in gun free zones.” This should be expanded on. This point is as relevant as ever in the wake of the recent Thousand Oaks shooting. The person who committed the atrocity did so in an area with some of the strictest gun laws in the entire nation. How do you think that someone in an area with such strict gun laws could be allowed to purchase a firearm? The answer is my original point, that the mental health system is failing in the United States and needs to be reformed in an effort reduce the number of these types of people who fall through the cracks and commit such horrible acts only for the crimes to be blamed on the firearms used by the person who carried it out and not the people of the society that failed them.

An article published in BBC Future by Rachel Nuwer explores the connection between mental health and mass shootings. However, Nuwer takes a different approach, one that says that blaming the mentally ill for acts of violence is not the answer and falsely attributing these types of crimes to the mentally ill is damaging for society. She cites, “those with mental illness occur account for less than 1% of all yearly gun-related homicides.” She continues, “a 2014 study, for example, found that just 2% of 951 patients discharged from a psychiatric hospital committed a violent act involving a gun…” Nuwer goes on to say that you can’t psychologically profile most mass shooters because they die in their crime, and that from what we do know we can tell that most offenders are angry young men who want revenge on a society that they feel abandoned them. I agree with Nuwer on this much, that these mass shooters are taking revenge on a society they feel failed them. However, I believe it is the responsibility of the people of this society to be able to step up and take accountability for people they fail to get the mental help for that need it, not to blame it on the instruments that these people use for their crimes. The reason that gun violence is so drastically low in the diagnosed mentally-ill as Nuwer outlines is simply that the diagnosed institutionalized mentally ill in the united states are not legally allowed to buy a gun. Of course, the mentally ill commit such a small percentage of gun crime because they have no legal way to obtain these guns.

Nuwer continues in a later paragraph, “some mass killers had even visited psychiatrists for behavioral problems prior to their attacks but had no diagnosis of a specific mental illness.” This is where I believe it is the responsibility of the people to recognize a failure in how we define mental illness and how we treat people whether we know they are affected or not. If the mental health system in America can’t expand its definition of diagnosable mental-illness to include people who portray characteristics of vengeful or broken people, then two things happen. The first is that these people never get the help they need from people who can provide it. The absence of a good up-bringing or poor decision making in these individuals is ignored and they are left to operate themselves in a society that they are unable to productively operate in. The second thing is that these people are never placed on the NICS federal background check list. Both of these two events are the key cause to these mass shootings in America. A ban on guns is not the answer. A reform in the mental health system and how we as people treat others as individuals is what America truly needs.

Gun control as a political issue is one that is fought between two sides of anti-gun proponents and pro-second amendment proponents. What I believe gets lost in this argument is the humanity of the people who commit such acts. Every new cycle of a mass shooting we are treated with the thoughts and prayers monologue, followed by a brief explanation of the type of crazy the shooter was, and immediately delve deep in to the rabbit hole of gun control and a ban on firearms. America was never meant to be a place where citizens could not own guns. This nation was founded on the principle that people had the right to protect themselves from each other and from a government that would seek to exploit and abuse them. The founding principles of this nation, and through civil rights movements in society, have guided us to a nation where every man woman and child is treated equally in the eyes of the government. I believe it is the people’s responsibility to recognize a failing system and come together as a nation to improve the quality of life and mental health for everyone who needs it.