

A public health viewpoint on guns

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A month ago, it was tempting to view the heartbreaking and senseless tragedy that took the lives of innocent children and adults in Newtown Connecticut as one of those “tipping points” in our national dialogue on gun violence and what to do about it.

Policy analyst Robert Spitzer cautions that gun policy debates typically “play themselves out with great fury but astonishingly little effect” noting that “the cycle of outrage, action, and reaction usually begins with the sensational and the horrific.”

The proposals announced last week by President Obama are significant if for no other reason than the fact that they elevate the narrower issue of preventing mass shootings, horrific as they may be, to a broader conversation on the public health problem of preventing gun violence.

Mass shootings have the odd effect of obscuring the comparatively mundane, yet devastating epidemic of firearm-related injuries and deaths in the US. Over 30,000 Americans were killed by guns last year – on an average day, 90 Americans died and another 200 were seriously injured from gun violence.

To put these grim statistics in perspective, a recent report in JAMA notes that “gun homicide alone causes 11,000 deaths each year, more than all US troops killed throughout the last decade in Iraq and Afghanistan. Remarkably, the 26 deaths in Newtown represent fewer gun homicides than the daily US average.”

A public health perspective on gun violence begins with the goal of harm reduction. It recognizes that gun control is not the only measure for reducing firearm-related violence any more than vaccinations are the only remedy for controlling infectious diseases. The same JAMA study contends that “gun violence arises from sociocultural, educational, behavioral, and product safety issues that transcend gun ownership alone.”

As such, any reform that reduces the harm posed by firearms while preserving an individual’s constitutional right to own a gun merits our consideration. Sensible reforms Congress could adopt immediately, and which the Supreme Court would likely uphold, include a ban on large-sized ammunition magazines, rapid and reliable background checks for all gun purchases, and a reinstatement of the ban on assault weapons.

Congress could also close the so-called “gun show loophole” which exempts unlicensed private sellers of firearms from conducting background checks on buyers at gun shows – a gap in

existing law permitting greater access to weapons for felons and others prohibited from owning firearms.

Dr. Garen Wintemute concludes that many of the public health measures being considered by lawmakers “will not end firearm violence, but they will reduce it, and that’s a goal worth fighting for.” Failing any action, though, we leave standing “social and policy decisions that, with some important exceptions, provide the widest possible array of firearms to the widest array of people, for use under the widest possible array of conditions.”

Make no mistake. Our impending “national dialogue” on gun violence will be as nasty and divisive as it gets, and that’s saying a lot considering the vitriol of the last election cycle. Nonetheless, it’s a discussion that is long overdue.

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