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Viewpoint: How Many Thousands More Will We Kill?

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Gian Luigi Ferri entered an office building at 101 California St. in July 1993, took an elevator to the 34th floor, and walked into a law office while carrying three pistols: two Nitrate, DC 9, 9 mm assault pistols and one Nariño, 45 caliber, model 1911, A1. Each was a semiautomatic with the two Tec 9s outfitted with Hell-Fire systems permitting firing of 300 to 500 rounds per minute. Ferri also had 500 rounds of 45 caliber "Black Talon" bullets and 200 rounds of 9 mm specially made anti-personnel bullets. The guns were purchased at the Pawn and Gun Shop in Henderson, Nev., and a Las Vegas gun show. Within about 25 minutes, he killed eight people and wounded six more.

Earlier last month, Adam Lanza broke into the elementary school in Newtown, Conn., carrying two semiautomatic pistols, a 10 mm Glock and a 9 mm Sig Sauer, and a 0.223 caliber M4 Bushmaster semiautomatic carbine. He had hundreds of bullets, multiple high-capacity magazines, and within less than an hour, he killed 26 people including 20 children.

Those assault-weapons mass killings were not unique. In the 20 years between San Francisco and Newtown tragedies there have been many others, including Columbine High School in Colorado (13 killed, 23 wounded in less than 35 minutes by an Intratec TEC-DC9 assault pistol, Hi Point 9 mm carbine, Savage 67H pump action shotgun, and a Savage 311-d-12 gauge shotgun); Virginia Tech (32 killed, 17 wounded by a Glock 19 pistol and a Walther P22 pistol in less than 30 minutes); Binghamton, N.Y. (13 killed, four wounded by a 9 mm Beretta handgun and a .45 handgun in 20 minutes); Tucson, Ariz. (six killed, 13 wounded by a Glock 19 pistol in less than 15 minutes); Omaha, Neb. (eight killed, five wounded by a WASR 10 assault rifle); Fort Hood, Texas (13 killed in less than 20 minutes by a Five Seven 5.7 mm pistol); Aurora, Colo. (12 killed, 50 wounded by two .40 caliber Glock pistols, a Remington 8/70 shotgun and a Smith & Wesson M&P 15 assault rifle in less than 15 minutes); Manchester, Conn. (eight killed, two wounded by a Sturm, Ruger SR 9 pistol) and Oak Creek, Wis. (six killed, three wounded by a 9 mm semiautomatic handgun and a Springfield Armory DN handgun in less than 30 minutes).

Some express sympathy about these "tragic circumstances," but say that there is nothing to be done. George Will argues "it is a mistake" to try "to write a gun control law that would prevent someone like 'James Holmes' [in Aurora, Colo.] from getting the arms he wants." The 2006 president of the NRA said gun laws are just a "proxy for fixing complex social problems," and the Assault Weapon Ban enacted by Congress in 1994 made no difference and was "useless and silly." Arizona Governor Jan Brewer said earlier last year that these "things would have happened whether guns were regulated or not." Others condemn "aberrant behavior" by the shooter, or blame society, or violent movies, television and video games, or white power music, but all these comments only justify doing nothing.

Setting the argument in this way misses the real issue and ignores undeniable facts. The fundamental question is this: Are the number, kind and availability of guns in America good or bad for us? Most

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Americans believe the answer is clear: They are bad; they kill tens of thousands of people every year, including the 20 young children in Newtown just last month. Some, like the NRA and their supporters, have a dramatically opposite view.

The NRA and its leadership are firmly on the side that answers the fundamental question with a resounding "Yes! Guns are good. There are only bad people." Their strongly held view is that everyone should have the right to carry any gun that person wants, and the more guns and their ready availability protect us and our children from people like Holmes, Ferri and Lanza. After a week of post-Newtown silence, the NRA announced its solution last month: more guns in schools with "armed security" for "every single school in America." A Newtown gun range owner wants more automatic weapons because "guns are why we're free in this country." A California gun-rights organization spokesman announced the day after the Aurora massacre: "Having a completely disarmed general citizenry really does not help preventing these types of mass shootings. If somebody in the theater had possibly been armed, probably fewer than a dozen people may have been killed and less than 50 people could have possibly been injured." And then the Aurora gun rights' spokesman on the scene made it clear: Gun laws only prevent citizens from protecting themselves and facilitate the "tragic consequences" because Colorado bans firearms in movie theaters, which prevented other patrons from carrying and using their firearms to bring the death toll down by shooting Holmes.

The undeniable facts do not support the NRA view. Every year, more than 30,000 Americans are killed by firearms and another 70,000 are wounded. In 2009, there were 31,347 firearms deaths and 73,505 nonfatal firearm injuries in 2010. This means that every day, there are 80 people fatally injured by gun — three Newtown massacres daily and nearly six times those killed in Aurora every day. It is these thousands of killings and injuries from firearms that are the issue. Those who want a gun in every citizen's hand ignore that these killings and injuries were by guns.

Do these numbers have any relationship to the number of guns in this country? Of course! There are nearly enough guns in this country for every man, woman and child to have one. We have more guns per inhabitant than any other country: at least more than 88 guns for every 100 inhabitants in the U.S. (the next nearest country is Yemen with 54, and none of the western nations are even close). The United States has 5 percent of the world's population and 50 percent of the guns.

Are these guns available? Of course! Lanza's mother lawfully bought the guns used by her son. Ferri and Holmes purchased most of theirs without registration from retail gun shops in Nevada. They could just as easily have bought all of them in Florida, Texas or Arizona, or without even an attempt at identification or registration, from one of the thousands of private sellers at gun shows, where more than 2 million guns are sold annually. This is why the Mexican gun cartels get their weapons here in the U.S., where there are 49,762 licensed gun dealers and 7,261 gun-selling pawn shops. That is more than five times as many retail sellers as Starbucks operates in this country. This is why the owner of a Riverdale, Ill., gun shop boasted: "When someone walks in the door and they have a heartbeat, its showtime. It's time to sell." A few months ago, the executive director of georgiacarry.org described the requirements to buy a gun there: be at least 21 and "be standing in front of the counter and breathing."

Can you buy any kind of gun? Yes! In most states, it's legal to buy military-style semiautomatic assault weapons, including AK 47s and AR 15s, which can fire 50 to 60 rounds per minute. Individuals can also buy large-capacity ammunition magazines capable of holding up to 100 rounds. These are anti-personnel weapons of war; they are designed to kill as many people as quickly as possible. And they kill more here in this country than those killed in the wars. During the 19 years between the San Francisco massacre in 1993 and the Newtown massacre, firearms in the United States claimed 167,000 more civilian lives than all of the Americans killed in combat in the major wars in the past 100 years (World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq).

Can something be done about the 595,000 firearms deaths since 1993 and will it be effective? Contrary to the views of those who say more guns of all kinds are good and will protect us, the facts say otherwise. There had been 13 gun massacres in Australia resulting in 102 deaths, leading up to the 1998 massacre in Port Arthur, Tanzania, when a gunman killed 35 people. The Australian federal government did something about it: All states implemented new gun laws and under the National Firearms Agreement, firearms legislation required national registration, outlawed certain long guns, and reduced the number of guns by a



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mandatory cash buyback. Firearms homicides dropped 59 percent by 2006, and there have been no mass shootings (four or more fatalities) in Australia since 1998.

It was after the massacre in San Francisco in 1993 that a few lawyers — including the author — formed an organization now called The Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. We, with many others, believe that smart gun laws save lives, and have led efforts that resulted in California now having the best gun laws in the country. Gun deaths in California in 1991 were 4,955; in 2011 there were 2,972 — a decrease of nearly 2,000. California requires a background check with every firearm purchase, bans assault weapons and large-capacity magazines, licenses firearms dealers, imposes a 10-day waiting period before completing a firearm purchase, prohibits the sale of junk guns, empowers local governments to regulate firearms and ammunition, and limits the carrying of concealed handguns in public places. A recent front-page article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported on the law center's research: States with sensible gun laws have lower gun-related homicides while those states without such laws had high firearm deaths (Alaska, Louisiana and Montana, with weak or no gun laws, had more than twice California's death rate). We did something about gun violence in California, and we have been and are now working with legislators and interested organizations to achieve the same results in other states throughout this country. But this is a national problem; we need national action, and the time is now!

While we have disturbed individuals in the United States who will get weapons and kill groups of people, we can save tens of thousands of lives, hundreds of thousands of gun-inflicted injuries and billions of dollars of taxpayer money with smart gun laws. The American people and communities deserve better than the senseless killings and injuries that the president of the NRA ignored by that organization's strong and successful opposition to the national law that banned Uzis and other weapons of war. It would be a dereliction of duty for our elected national leaders and officials to ignore the undeniable facts and fail to act now.

William Edlund is one of the founders and current president of The Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

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