

Gun Ownership and Mental Health

We live in a society that comprises great diversity of behaviors and ideologies. We are also a society that seeks to accommodate as many of these behaviors and ideologies as possible. However, as a society, do we not have the right to ensure the safety of our citizens? Do we not have the responsibility to protect our children as they play and learn in their schools? Do we not have the right to enjoy a movie without fear of being killed or maimed? Is the second amendment greater in scope and importance than the other constitutional amendments? Given the present environment, apparently it is.

Should we continue to provide greater protection to gun owners at the expense of the rest of society, we can count on more mass killings and misery. As a private citizen, this must stop and I believe that we should no longer tolerate seeing people mourn the loss of family and friends simply because others have a need to arm themselves with weapons that are designed to kill.

As psychologists, we are also deeply committed to a life as free as possible from any type of harm. We are also committed to the needs of people who are experiencing mental, emotional and behavioral problems. Now that the conversation about gun violence appears to be focusing on the relationship between mental health and gun violence, it is here that we, psychologists and other mental health professionals, can make a difference and become part of the national dialogue on this issue. However, to be clear, the mental stability of a person seeking to obtain firearms is only one aspect of the wider picture to control and reduce gun violence.

Legislation that focuses on types of weapons that individuals should be allowed to own and related registration issues also need to be part of the mix along with mental health.

A Proposal To Integrate Mental Health Assessment Into Access To Guns

The proposal that is outlined here is not designed to be a complete solution to reducing gun violence. It is, however, a start of a dialogue for psychologists to enter our input into the debate. This proposal comprises three parts to a change in gun laws that is consistent with protecting the constitutional right to acquire firearms while reducing gun violence by people who may be impaired and should be denied access to guns. Nothing in this proposal assumes psychologists, or anyone else, can predict future gun violence or particularly indicate which individuals will commit a crime. If implemented, the proposal is analogous to motor vehicle laws that seek to identify people who might be potentially harmful to themselves or others due to an impairment. If the impairment cannot be eliminated or reduced to the point where it no longer is viewed as an impairment, a person so affected can regain the permission to drive.

The three parts to this proposal comprises:

Psychological Assessment for initial gun acquisition and periodic review.
Establishing a Registration Database .
Establishing a National Impairment Database

Assessment Clearance

Any person who seeks to purchase a gun of any type of firearm that is legal under a statute will be required to obtain a standardized psychological assessment from a licensed doctoral level mental health specialist. The assessment protocol shall be based upon instruments that are designated by statute and must include a thorough history. The sole objective of the assessment is to identify factors that may be particularly related to an impairment that can be related to harm to oneself or others. For example, a person who who is experiencing a psychotic disorder, major mood disorder, cognitive deficit or severe personality disorder is most probably impaired and should not be allowed to have access to a firearm while experiencing any of the above. This is not finite list. Persons who are denied clearance can appeal a denial. Persons who can demonstrate that they no longer are impaired can seek another assessment. Professionals performing these assessments should be provided legal immunity for their decision as a person denied clearance is entitled to an appeal and review. No person shall be allowed to purchase a firearm or related products without having this certificate of clearance. The issue then becomes putting our focus on the people who use guns to kill people, which is consistent with some who chant that "Guns don't kill people. People kill people."

Registration Database

After an assessment is completed, the mental health professional will issue and sign a standardized document stating that an assessment has been performed and that the person listed in the document has no demonstrated impairment. No person will be allowed to purchase a firearm without this official clearance document. Gun sellers must keep a copy of this document as part of the sale documentation. This data must be entered into a national registration database so that dealers, whether in retail or gun shows, will have access. Private conveyance of firearms must be reported just as motor vehicles sold by individuals are now subject to report.

National Impairment Database

Clearly, there is the possibility that a person acquires a psychological impairment after receiving clearance for an initial gun purchase. This type of occurrence presents difficult operational problems to insure that those persons possessing firearms and are also impaired can be identified and their access to firearms restricted while the impairment exists. Also, there are issues of confidentiality that must be considered. One solution is to have a National Impairment Database that only professional mental health providers can access to enter a person's name and other identifying information. Any person who meets the statutory definition of an impairment that would deny them access to guns would be entered into the database. Any person listed in the database would not be allowed to purchase or maintain

firearms or related products. If, and when, the impairment is no longer a factor, the provider would be required to remove the person from the national database. The statute would have to detail how and what to do with any firearms that such persons already possesses. One solution would be for the firearms to be kept by the local police department until such time as the person was removed from the database and received clearance. Once clearance is obtained, the firearms could then be returned.

Discussion

This proposal is not viewed as a total solution to end gun violence. No solution will ever achieve 100% protection. It should be viewed as a starting point and debate on how mental health professionals can participate and have our input into this growing and important societal issue. For too long practitioners have been left out of too many important policy debates. Moreover, it is not sufficient that we simply issue pronouncements against gun violence or any other issue that emerges. We need to be for something. We need to be proactive. We need to demonstrate that we have something to offer.

We do not view our proposal as being complete and without issues. However, it does provide a framework to see how mental health professionals can provide services that can help with solving this important issue. Gun violence will continue to rise unless all of us decide that something concrete and reasonable must be done. There is no single answer or solution. People do have a right to acquire and own firearms. How and when they acquire these firearms is an appropriate discussion for all of us to consider. As psychologists, we have other considerations and talents that should also become part of the discussion. Hopefully, our input will be heard and considered.