NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Can new gun laws make a difference?

Pat Perriello | Jan. 9, 2013 NCR Today

How often we are told that no law could prevent a particular act of gun violence. Nothing could prevent a deranged individual from obtaining a weapon and initiating a massacre such as at Columbine or Sandy Hook. Data included in a *Time* magazine article [1] from the Jan. 14 edition give a very different picture.

Two points need to be made. One, the number of guns in our country far exceeds the number of guns in any other country in the world. In fact, we are very close to having one gun for every single American. Second, every other country that has seen a major incident of gun violence, like Australia and Norway, has strengthened their gun laws and seen a dramatic decrease in gun violence. Yet gun advocates never mention these statistics. Other countries concluded that the safety of their citizens was a higher value than the proliferation of firearms. Can the United States not learn from their success?

Why is our country so conflicted on this issue? A clear majority wants stiffer gun laws, yet there is also a majority who do not want a ban on assault weapons. Gun buyback programs are going well in Connecticut and Los Angeles. Yet some state and local governments have instituted measures to arm teachers and put armed security guards in every school. There has been a rush around the country to buy assault weapons and ammunition. As President Barack Obama said, we need change in our country. The data support the notion that we are not making ourselves safer, but are in fact making our country more violent. Those who refuse to recognize these facts and choose to distort them need to be challenged by the rest of us.

Finally, I want to say a word or two about mental health issues. As one who has worked in the mental health field throughout my professional life, I'm all for improved mental health services. Yet it is interesting that gun advocates like to turn the conversation to this topic. I wonder why they never bother to point out that whatever our efforts in this area, we will never be able to prevent all violent incidents by addressing mental health issues. We will never be able to identify every individual who may be a threat to themselves or others.

We console ourselves on the notion that there is just some whacko out there who snaps and that is why we have these rare occurrences. We simply need to identify these individuals and keep guns away from them. Yet there is no foolproof method for making such identifications. In fact, I think there are few of us that can guarantee we might not go berserk under the right circumstances. Consider the cases of people who have lost their jobs and then go back and kill the boss and fellow employees. Situational depression from the loss of a loved one or other trauma can lead to thoughts of suicide and even a desire to lash out against others. The presence or accessibility of a gun can result in tragedy. Often if a gun had not been readily available, the individual may well have returned to a more normal state in a day or two and the tragedy would not have occurred.

There is too much misinformation out there, and it is time to fight this battle and demand sensible gun legislation. Take Australia as an example. After a terrible incident in 1996, the government virtually prohibited automatic and semiautomatic weapons. Their gun homicide rate per 100,000 people is now one-tenth of a percent. In the United States, it is 3.2 percent. We may not need to go that far, but maintaining the status quo is unimaginable in the face of these worldwide realities.

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[1] http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,2132763,00.html