

The massive human and moral cost of gun violence

Written by Marian Wright Edelman, NNPA Columnist
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The heartrending massacre of 20, 6- and 7-year-old children and six educators in Newtown, Conn. has galvanized public attention once again after a mass shooting. But the killing of children by gun violence is not new. It has been an unreported and under-reported plague that has snuffed out the lives of 119,079 children and teenagers since 1979.

That's an average of 3,721 child and teen deaths every year for 32 years. That's 4,763 classrooms of 25 children each. The number of children and teens killed by guns since 1979 is two and a half times greater than the number of U.S. military personnel killed in action in the Vietnam (47,434) or Korean (33,739) wars, and more than 22 times greater than American military personnel killed in the wars in Afghanistan (1,712) and in Iraq (3,518).

The United States of America has spent a trillion and a half dollars on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars so far, purportedly to protect our children and citizens from enemies without, while ignoring the reality that the greatest threats to child safety and wellbeing come from enemies within.

Gun violence saturates our children's lives and relentlessly threatens them every day. It has romped through their playgrounds; invaded their birthday parties; terrorized their Head Start classrooms, child care centers, and schools; frolicked down the streets they walk to and from school; danced through their school buses; waited at the red light and bus stop; lurked behind trees; run them down on the corner; shot them through their bedroom windows, on their front porches, and in their neighborhoods.

Gun violence has taught, entertained, and tantalized them incessantly across television, movie, and video game screens and the Internet. It has snatched away their parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters, friends, and teachers; sapped their energy and will to learn; and made them forget about tomorrow. It has nagged and picked at their youthful minds and spirits and darkened their dreams, day in and day out, snuffing out the promise and joy of childhood and inflicting them with post-traumatic stress disorders – often chronic. It has caused them recurring nightmares and made them afraid to go outdoors or to the movies.

It has made them want to or feel they have to get a gun or join a gang to protect themselves because adults can't or won't protect them. It has made them plan their own funerals because they don't think they'll live to adulthood. It has killed them with guns every three hours and fifteen minutes and injured them every 34 minutes. It terrifies them and makes them cry inside and wonder if and when enough adults are ever going to stand up and make it stop and make children safe.

President Obama, in his moving remarks at the Sandy Hook interfaith prayer vigil at Newtown High School on December 16 got it right when he said: "Caring for our children. It's our first job. If we don't get that right, we don't get anything right. That's how, as a society, we will be judged." And we will not pass the test of the God of the prophets or New Testament or all great faiths if we do not protect all of our sacred children against repeated and preventable gun deaths and injuries. Every child has a right to live and to dream and to strive for a future that is not destroyed in a second because we cowered before a special interest lobby and refused to protect them.

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What can we do? Learn the truth about and debunk the myths that guns make us safe. Did you know that one third of all households with children younger than 18 have a gun and 40 percent of gun-owning households with children store their guns unlocked? Contrary to what many people believe, having a gun in your home doesn't make you safer but instead endangers you and your loved ones. A gun in the home makes the likelihood of homicide three times higher, suicide three to five times higher, and accidental death four times higher. For every time a gun in the home injures or kills in self-defense, there are 11 completed and attempted gun suicides, seven criminal assaults and homicides with a gun, and four unintentional shooting deaths or injuries.

Read the Children's Defense Fund (CDF)'s new "Protect Children Not Guns: The Truth About Guns," which debunks myths that guns make you safe. Convene congregational and parent and community study groups and let the enormity of lost child and human life sweep over you and pierce your hearts and make you determined to wake up, stand up and do something! Check CDF's Web site regularly for steps you can take and that others are taking. Small acts by enough of us can set off big ripples across our nation and shake up our political leaders.

The important thing is to care and to act and to keep acting for as long as it takes until the NRA's lock on gun policy is broken. Stop shopping at stores that sell firearms over the counter, making their purchase and use as routine and normal as a flashlight or toaster. Assault weapons should not be normalized and treated as a household product or glorified as American as apple pie. Turn off the violent TV shows.

Stop buying the violent toys and video games and call for nonviolent conflict resolution and restorative justice training of our educators, faith leaders, children, and all of us. Let's make violence unacceptable rather than acceptable in our nation which leads the world's industrialized nations in military expenditures, in number of guns sold and in circulation (an estimated 300 million), and in child, youth, and adult civilian gun deaths.

At the height of the Vietnam War, anti-war demonstrators filled the Mall and confronted the president, Congress, and Pentagon by calling for an end to that war. What is it going to take for the American people—for you and for me—to push the president and members of Congress and governors and state legislators to stand up to the NRA, gun manufacturers, and sellers? What is it going to take for them to place protection of children and youths and adults ahead of the protection of guns and profits and their election to office? How much is a child's life worth in today's political economy in America?

In 2013, as we prepare to celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday and the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington and the dream of our gun-slain prophet of nonviolence, let us truly hear and follow rather than just celebrate him. Now is the time to free ourselves from the plague of gun violence which has taken more than 1.3 million American lives since Dr. King and Robert Kennedy's assassinations in 1968. This is twice the loss of life than all American battle casualties in all the major wars we have fought since our nation began: the Revolutionary War (4,435); the War of 1812 (2,260); the Mexican War (1,733); the Civil War (214,938); the Spanish American War (385); World War I (53,402); World War II (291,557); the Korean War (33,739); the Vietnam War (47,434); the Persian Gulf War (148); the Iraq War (3,518), and the war in

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Afghanistan (1,712).

Isn't it way past time for some hard soul searching about what we believe as Americans? Do we believe in the sanctity of life in America or don't we? We decide.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.