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Mass shootings: focus first on soft targets

Steve Bakke  April 4, 2023



Numerous times in years past I've expressed my impatience with legislators' attempts to quiet public screams to "just do something" after a mass shooting – often at a school. We've become hooked on unhelpful feel-good legislative solutions while achieving little. Solutions tend to be needlessly limited to request for more gun control laws and mental health. That may work for some problems, but for other, usually more emotionally charged events, more is required.

Our Founders' comments regarding firearms seem to reflect a presumption of order and competence achieved through rules, regulations, training, and wise controls. We should agree with the late Justice Scalia that some form of firearm regulation is constitutional. But that profound comment alone solves nothing. Rather than just repeating versions of that, I want to take a look at the problem by addressing the issue differently.

All gun crimes deserve attention, but some categories deserve separate attention because facts, motivations, and solutions are different. For example, over the years a significant increase in firearm ownership has been met by a relative improvement in overall violent crime statistics. However, one category hasn't followed suit.

Unlike most violent crimes, mass shootings are increasing. A common definition of mass shootings is one in which 3 or more people are killed. I believe it's best to separate analysis of "soft target" mass shootings from other events such as gang violence. "Soft targets" refer to relatively low security, vulnerable populations – schools for example. We've learned that unlike some forms of mass violence, reducing school shootings will demand far more than traditional aggressive law enforcement.

In contrast to hundreds of deadly gang conflicts, there have been 15 mass school shootings, measured from Columbine in 1999 up to and including the recent shooting at The Covenant School. School violence and gang violence are far different crimes and must be dealt with differently. And for school shootings, intervention and prevention is an overriding concern.

A deep dive into the school shooting problem will require a new mindset. Unfortunately each political extreme has ideas that are “off limits” for discussion. Those “sacred cows” will have to be tossed aside. Some conclusions might be considered politically incorrect by some, or unpopular for other reasons by others. But popularity is not a requirement for validity or effectiveness.

One hurdle is agreeing on a list of things that may be controversial. The issue of regulating firearms typically enjoys no “common ground” for the opposing extremes in this controversy. Nothing can be off limits. Red flag laws, unpopular for many, should be carefully evaluated. And there may be cultural issues contributing to the problem, so we dare not dodge giving that fair consideration.

Moral and behavioral boundaries have changed, sometimes even disappeared. Life seems to have been devalued in many different ways. Rejecting MLK’s legacy of deemphasizing racial differences has increased society’s polarization. Urban “poverty plantations,” often hotbeds of hatred, is an example of where good intentions have trapped generations of citizens. These and other subjects must be evaluated.

It’ll be hard for some to accept, but gun-free zones are not oases of safety. Rather, they’re danger zones. Could hardening school security be part of the answer? Let’s even open up the discussion of seeking cooperation from the NRA. Bury the enmity and seek knowledge of how their training programs, security expertise, and technical knowledge might improve our solution and be part of our plan.

Correlations – signaling characteristics – should be identified. Individually, these might be innocent, but in combination they mean something. It could be religious affiliations, family structure, substance abuse, fascination with violence-filled entertainment, mental illness, childhood trauma, or reasons for revenge. Identifying these details won’t solve the problem but could give hints for finding the next step in the process.

We have a long way to go. We need to patiently answer some questions about this rising tide of school shootings. How did these individuals end up on this pathway to violence? And what will work to reduce this evil?

Progress won’t be made by continuing to simply apply the same mix of laws, rules, enforcement, analyses, and policies. Those must be pursued and improved, of course. And our record of many legislative fits and starts must be changed. But let’s also start generating results by burying our biases and focusing on each unique problem, one at a time.