

Our Children are more Precious than Our Guns

Last week, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that the Second Amendment to our Constitution grants private citizens the right to non-militia private gun ownership. That same week, a 3-year old playing with a gun in his family's living room, accidentally shot himself in the head and died. A four-year old pulled a gun from her grandmother's purse, shot herself and died. And a six year old was killed when playing with a gun that his friend brought into his house.

Tragic stories of accidental or unintentional shootings from the careless storage of guns at home are all too common. Unintentional shootings commonly occur when children find an adult's loaded handgun in a drawer or closet, and while playing with it shoot themselves, a sibling or a friend. The unintentional firearm-related death rate for children 0-14 years old is NINE times higher in the U.S. than the combined incidence in the 25 countries with the next highest number of reported fatalities.

Such statistics direct us toward the one fail-safe solution – removing guns from homes and denying gun ownership to private citizens will save lives. In fact, a gun in the home is 22 times more likely to be used in a criminal, unintentional, or suicide-related shooting than to be used in a self-defense shooting.

How much do guns endanger innocent victims? 148 children in Florida were killed in 2005 by guns according to the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Children and youth appear to be especially vulnerable to death and injury when guns are present. In a single year, 3,012 children and teens were killed by gunfire in the United States, according to the latest national data released in 2002. That is one child every three hours; eight children every day; and more than 50 children every week. And every year, at least 4 to 5 times as many kids and teens suffer from non-fatal firearm injuries. (data from the Children's Defense Fund and National Center for Health Statistics) American children are more at risk from firearms than the children of any other industrialized nation. In one year, firearms killed no children in Japan, 19 in Great Britain, 57 in Germany, 109 in France, 153 in Canada, and 5,285 in the United States. (data from the Centers for Disease Control)

What do the children say? According to Stacie Blake, Executive Director of Community Tampa Bay, teens expect more from us. "Tampa Bay teens tell us that it is easy to get a gun and they often don't feel safe at school. They come to us wanting real answers to their fears, they want honest dialogue and an opportunity to reach across borders, not build more isolation and fear. Too many have firsthand experience with a peer being killed. Children devised these slogans to educate the community: Use your voice, eliminate hate. Raise your standards, not your fists."

America is losing too many children to gun violence. Between 1979 and 2001, gunfire killed 90,000 children and teens in America (Children's Defense Fund and National

Center for Health Statistics) – more than the sum total of American soldiers who died in the Korean, Vietnam and Iraq wars. In one year, more children and teens died in the U.S. from gunfire than from cancer, pneumonia, influenza, asthma, and HIV/AIDS combined. (Children's Defense Fund)

A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the People to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.

So states the Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America. Intending States to organize in defense of national security, the National Guards come closest today to the form and function of the militias in the days of the Constitutional Congress. A relatively small number of citizens is called to active duty in the National Guard, even during times of war like now. We have no universal system of conscription into the armed forces should we require a massive call of citizens to active duty. Our wars are fought by a relative minority (minority by number and social class) of citizens eligible to participate by age. Yet, still, as in 1789, we permit individuals to own, bear and use arms for non-militia purposes of personal safety.

This strategy is misinformed. No longer in need of militias to protect us at a hand-to-hand level of combat in case our nation might be attacked, we must acknowledge the real dangers private gun ownership poses to all Americans, starting with our youngest citizens.

Private handguns provided no protection to the citizens during the attacks on September 11, 2001. But, during the same year, a nearly equal number of children were killed by private guns in our homes. As a nation, we are proud of what we achieved post 9-11. Our ability to work together to overcome pain, provide support to neighbors, understand our shared humanity and to face and overcome the fear of differences. These are resources that build real bridges and safety in communities and in the world.

Now consider what we've learned about the safety of people who house firearms. Cities' grim police records expose the myth of safety through gun ownership at a population level. Seattle and Vancouver, for example, are located within a short drive from one another and have similar wealth and population demographics. The only major difference between the two is that the Canadian city denies citizens the right to own handguns. Six times as many people die from homicide in Seattle each year, mostly by gunfire, than die in Vancouver. At the personal level of safety, the fact is that among young people under 20, one will commit suicide with a gun every eight hours. The risk of homicide in the home is three times greater in households with guns. The risk of suicide is five times greater in households with guns.

There is an undeniable feeling of power experienced when first holding a weapon. It may be accompanied by exhilaration, fear, distaste, or excitement. These powerful emotions are difficult to counter with themes of discourse, dialogue and safety facts. But informed and educated citizens are responsible to support their children, families and communities

through careful actions, contemplative selection of leaders and promotion of laws that keep the nation informed, productive and safe.

The Constitution and its accompanying Bill of Rights frame, above all, the enduring values and principles that distinguish our nation as a beacon of justice, democracy and the inherent worth of citizens of every age, race, gender, religion and political ideology. As a framework for our national mores, the Constitution and its Amendments guide us when considering how to adapt our behavior and our laws to the development of modern technologies and modern societies. If the equation is guns versus children, let's have the children win. We can learn from nations that limit gun ownership to military personnel and law enforcement agents and consequently experience almost no violence domestically. The truth is, peace starts within. Within ourselves, our homes, our communities.