

## The Availability of Guns Is the Issue Not Mentally Ill Shooters

School shootings are distinctly American phenomena. Unfortunately, the public focus is either on the mental state of shooters or on the availability of guns.

In fact, shootings by people with mental illnesses represent less than 1% of all yearly gun-related homicides in the United States. The overall contribution of people with mental illnesses to violent crimes is only about 3%. When these crimes are examined in detail, an even smaller percentage are found to involve firearms. Criminals and angry teenagers and adults use guns.

Still, there is reason to be concerned about the mental health of our young citizens. Most are doing well, but at least one in three are not. At least one in four have experienced neglect and/or abuse at some point in their lives and are predisposed to violence in later life.

The United States ranks 18<sup>th</sup> of 21 Western countries in overall child wellbeing. American children are clearly falling short intellectually. They rank 23<sup>rd</sup> in science, 17<sup>th</sup> in reading and 31<sup>st</sup> in math achievement out of 32 Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development countries. These include Shanghai, China (1<sup>st</sup> in all), Finland (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>), South Korea (6<sup>th</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>), Canada (8<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>), Germany (13<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>) and Poland (19<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>).

The Centers for Disease Control's 2016 Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that nationwide 6% of students missed at least 1 day of school during the past month because they felt unsafe in school.

Overall child deaths in the United States greatly exceed those in comparable nations, largely because of the prevalence of gun deaths. Of each 1 million children in the United States, 6,500 die of all causes annually in the United States compared to 3,600 in Germany and 2,500 in Japan.

In Chicago, more than 440 school-age children were shot in 2012; sixty died. "I think people in Chicago have almost gotten numb to the statistics," said Dexter Voisin, a researcher at the University of Chicago. "For every kid who is murdered, about 100 kids witness a murder or are victims of nonfatal injuries, robberies, muggings and gang-related incidents."

Mental health professionals are all too familiar with the use of guns in suicides and homicides, but focusing on the mental state of shooters misses the point. Criminals and angry persons use guns.

No one would shoot anyone if handguns and automatic weapons were not readily available. The latter are military weapons that have no place in civilian hands. Arming school personnel appeals to our reactive society but would only benefit gun manufacturers.

No mental health interventions will ever prevent the vast majority of shootings in our homes, on our streets and in our schools. Strict gun control laws that reduce the availability of guns will. At the same time, the mental health of our young citizens does cry out for attention.