

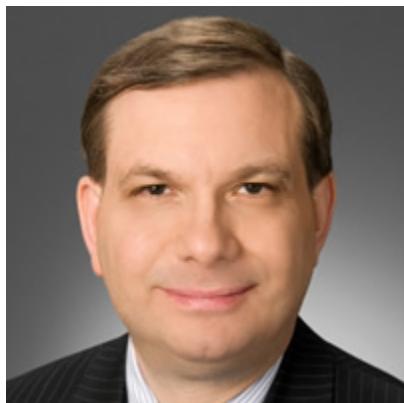
The Facts about Mass Shootings

It's time to address mental health and gun-free zones.

By John Fund



Near the Newtown, Conn., school massacre



John Fund 

A few things you won't hear about from the saturation coverage of the Newtown, Conn., school massacre:

Mass shootings are no more common than they have been in past decades, despite the impression given by the media.

In fact, the high point for mass killings in the U.S. was 1929, according to criminologist Grant Duwe of the Minnesota Department of Corrections.

Incidents of mass murder in the U.S. declined from 42 in the 1990s to 26 in the first decade of this century.

The chances of being killed in a mass shooting are about what they are for being struck by lightning.

Until the Newtown horror, the three worst K–12 school shootings ever had taken place in either Britain or Germany.

Almost all of the public-policy discussion about Newtown has focused on a debate over the need for more gun control. In reality, gun control in a country that already has 200 million privately owned firearms is likely to do little to keep weapons out of the hands of criminals. We would be better off debating two taboo subjects — the laws that make it difficult to control people with mental illness and the growing body of evidence that “gun-free” zones, which ban the carrying of firearms by law-abiding individuals, don’t work.

First, the mental-health issue. A lengthy study by *Mother Jones* magazine found that at least 38 of the 61 mass shooters in the past three decades “displayed signs of mental health problems prior to the killings.” *New York Times* columnist David Brooks and Cornell Law School professor William Jacobson have both suggested that the ACLU-inspired laws that make it so difficult to intervene and identify potentially dangerous people should be loosened. “Will we address mental-health and educational-privacy laws, which instill fear of legal liability for reporting potentially violent mentally ill people to law enforcement?” asks Professor Jacobson. “I doubt it.”

Gun-free zones have been the most popular response to previous mass killings. But many law-enforcement officials say they are actually counterproductive. “Guns are already banned in schools. That is why the shootings happen in schools. A school is a ‘helpless-victim zone,’” says Richard Mack, a former Arizona sheriff. “Preventing any adult at a school from having access to a firearm eliminates any chance the killer can be stopped in time to prevent a rampage,” Jim Kouri, the public-information officer of the National Association of Chiefs of Police, told me earlier this year at the time of the Aurora, Colo., Batman-movie shooting. Indeed, there have been many instances — from the high-school shooting by Luke Woodham in Mississippi, to the New Life Church shooting in Colorado Springs, Colo. — where a killer has been stopped after someone got a gun from a parked car or elsewhere and confronted the shooter.

Economists John Lott and William Landes conducted a groundbreaking study in 1999, and found that a common theme of mass shootings is that they occur in places where guns are banned and killers know everyone will be unarmed, such as shopping malls and schools.

I spoke with Lott after the Newtown shooting, and he confirmed that nothing has changed to alter his findings. He noted that the Aurora shooter, who killed twelve people earlier this year, had a choice of seven movie theaters that were showing the Batman movie he was obsessed with. All were within a 20-minute drive of his home. The Cinemark Theater the killer ultimately chose

wasn't the closest, but it was the only one that posted signs saying it banned concealed handguns carried by law-abiding individuals. All of the other theaters allowed the approximately 4 percent of Colorado adults who have a concealed-handgun permit to enter with their weapons.

"Disarming law-abiding citizens leaves them as sitting ducks," Lott told me. "A couple hundred people were in the Cinemark Theater when the killer arrived. There is an extremely high probability that one or more of them would have had a legal concealed handgun with him if they had not been banned."

Lott offers a final damning statistic: "With just one single exception, the attack on congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson in 2011, every public shooting since at least 1950 in the U.S. in which more than three people have been killed has taken place where citizens are not allowed to carry guns."

There is no evidence that private holders of concealed-carry permits (which are either easy to obtain or not even required in more than 40 states) are any more irresponsible with firearms than the police. According to a 2005 to 2007 study by researchers at the University of Wisconsin and Bowling Green State University, police nationwide were convicted of firearms violations at least at a 0.002 percent annual rate. That's about the same rate as holders of carry permits in the states with "shall issue" laws.

Despite all of this evidence, the magical thinking behind gun-free zones is unlikely to be questioned in the wake of the Newtown killings. Having such zones gives people a false sense of security, and woe to the politician or business owner who now suggests that a "gun-free zone" revert back to what critics would characterize as "a wild, wild West" status. Indeed, shortly after the Cinemark attack in Colorado, the manager of the nearby Northfield Theaters changed its policy and began banning concealed handguns.

In all of the fevered commentary over the Newtown killings, you will hear little discussion of the fact that we may be making our families and neighbors less safe by expanding the places where guns aren't allowed. But that is precisely what we may be doing. Both criminals and the criminally insane have shown time and time again that those laws are the least of the problems they face as they carry out their evil deeds.

— *John Fund is a national-affairs columnist for NRO.*