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Gun Control After Newtown by Jeffrey D. Sachs - Project Syndicate

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Jeffrey D. Sachs

Jeffrey D. Sachs, Professor of Sustainable Development, Professor of Health Policy and Management, and Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, is also Special Adviser to the United …
NEW YORK – The brutal murder of 20 children and seven adults in Newtown, Connecticut, shakes us to the core as individuals and requires a response as citizens. The United States seems to reel from one mass gun killing to another – roughly one a month this year alone. Easy access to guns in the US leads to horrific murder rates relative to other highly educated and wealthy societies. America needs to find a better way.

Other countries have done so. Between the mid-1970’s and the mid-1990’s, Australia had several mass shootings. After a particularly horrible massacre in 1996, a new prime minister, John Howard, declared that enough was enough. He instituted a severe crackdown on gun ownership, and forced would-be gun owners to submit to a rigorous application process, and to document why they would need a gun.

Conditions for gun ownership in Australia are now very strict, and the registration and approval process can take a year or more. Howard’s government also implemented a rigorous “buyback” policy, to enable the government to purchase guns already owned by the public.

The policy worked. While violent crime has not ended in Australia, murders are down, and, even more dramatically, there has not been a single mass shooting since 1996 in which three or more people died (the definition used in many studies of mass shootings). Before the crackdown, there had been 13 such massacres in 18 years.

Yet the US still refuses to act, even after this year’s string of
shocking incidents: the massacre in a movie theatre in Colorado, an attack on a Sikh community in Milwaukee, another on a shopping mall in Oregon, and many more before the ruthless slaughter of first graders and school staff in Newtown. The gun lobby in the US remains powerful, and politicians are afraid to counter it. Given the shooting of then-Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in 2011, perhaps they even fear that they, too, might be targeted.

There can be little doubt that some societies are more steeped in violence than others, even controlling for obvious factors like income levels and education. The US homicide rate is roughly four times that of comparable societies in Western Europe, and Latin America’s homicide rates are even higher than in the US (and dramatically higher than Asian countries at roughly the same income level). What accounts for staggeringly high rates in the US and Latin America?

American violence is rooted in history. The US and Latin American countries are all “conquest” societies, in which Europeans ruled over multi-racial societies. In many of these countries, including the US, the European conquerors and their descendants nearly wiped out the indigenous populations, partly through disease, but also through war, starvation, death marches, and forced labor.

In the US and many Latin American countries, slaveholding fueled mass violence as well. The slaves – and generations of their descendants – were routinely murdered.

The US also developed a particular populist belief that gun ownership constitutes a vital protection against government tyranny. The US was born in a citizens’ revolt against British imperial power. The right of citizens to organize militias to fight government tyranny was therefore a founding idea of the new country, enshrined in the Second Amendment to the US Constitution, which declares that, because a country needs a well-regulated militia, the people have the right to bear arms.

Since citizens’ militias are anachronistic, gun owners now use the second amendment merely to defend individual gun ownership, as if that somehow offers protection against tyranny. A reckless, right-wing Supreme Court has agreed with them. As a result, gun ownership has become perversely linked to freedom in the vast gun-owning American sub-culture.

But, instead of protection of freedom, Americans nowadays are getting massive bloodshed and fear. The claim that gun ownership ensures freedom is especially absurd, given that most of the world’s vibrant democracies have long since cracked down on private gun ownership. No tyrant has risen in Australia since Howard’s gun-control reforms.

Simply put, freedom in the twenty-first century does not depend on unregulated gun ownership. Indeed, America’s gun culture is a threat to freedom, after the murder of a president, senator, and other public leaders, and countless assassination attempts against public officials over recent decades.

Yet US gun culture remains as pervasive as it is unrecorded. America reels from one shooting disaster to the next, and on nearly every occasion, politicians dutifully declare their continued devotion to unregulated gun ownership. Indeed, no one even knows how many guns Americans hold. The number is estimated to be around 270 million, or almost one per person on average. According to one recent poll, 47% of households have a gun at home.

The shooting in Newtown was not only especially horrific and heartbreaking, but is also part of an increasingly common pattern – a specific kind of murder-suicide that has been carefully studied by psychologists and psychiatrists. Loners, often with paranoid tendencies, commit these heinous acts as part of their own suicide. They use carefully planned and staged mass murders of innocents in order to take revenge on society and to glorify themselves as they take their own lives.
The perpetrators are not hardened criminals; many have no previous criminal record. They are pathetic, deranged, and often have struggled with mental instability for much of their lives. They need help – and society needs to keep guns out of their reach.

America has now suffered around 30 shooting massacres over the past 30 years, including this year’s deadly dozen; each is a gut-wrenching tragedy for many families. And yet, each time, gun owners scream that freedom will be eliminated if they are unable to buy assault weapons and 100-round clips.

The bloodbath in Newtown is the time to stop feeding this gun frenzy. Australia and other countries provide models of how to do it: regulate and limit gun ownership to approved uses. America’s real freedoms depend on sane public policy.

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prove the hardest to deal with.

2. Commented

**Gildete Lima** 25 December 2012

I had the honor of having Professor Sachs as a guest speaker in many occasions while I was attending my master program at Columbia University. He never disappoints me! This gun-control article is one of the brightest I've ever read so far! Thank you professor Sachs. It's always a pleasure to read your pieces.

- Expand all
- Expand

3. Commented

**Sydney Lambrick** 20 December 2012

Anton is correct: it is not the weapons that kill, it is the humans that use them. Nonetheless, there must be legislation in place to prevent those people from acquiring those weapons. How else can this be done unless there is a blanket ban on those weapons? The heartwrenching tragedy in Newport could perhaps have been avoided had the ban on assault rifles in the USA had still been in place. The lame defence by the NRA and the gun lobby, here in Australia, that guns don't kill people, people kill people is illogical: what do people use guns for? Unlike motor vehicles, which do kill if misused, guns are made for one purpose only.

1. Commented

**Paul E. Condo @no** 21 December 2012

A crazy person is a person, and as such has certain legal rights that rightly require respect. A gun is a thing. It is not even a pseudo-person, as are corporations. I think banning certain types of guns from society is much easier, much more doable, much less costly, to accomplish than denying freedom to a mildly disfunctional, but real person. If only manifestly disfunctional persons are target for denial we will not see any change in the rate of these atrocities. All the people who have committed these acts in the recent past have either not been committable, or did not have legal permission to have a weapon, but nevertheless obtained access through a breakdown in the system.

4. Commented

**Michael Cohen** 19 December 2012

I hope that the brutal killings in Newtown will cause people to put aside their prejudices and seriously address the issue of how to prevent these tragedies.

As part of this process a number of things must be kept in mind.
- All sides must be allowed to contribute to the discussion provided they accept that protecting lives, especially of our children, is the primary goal.
- Facts matter. Whatever policies are proposed they must be evaluated based on past history and their impacts must be monitored once they are adopted and appropriate changes made.
- Each side must identify their core requirements and be willing to compromise on other issues.
- Forget about the slippery slope argument. Children's lives are too important to be sacrificed for unfounded...
We live in a democratic society. We have much more effective ways of controlling our government besides guns.

**Anton Könen** 19 December 2012

I consider it more a social problem than a legal one. In a society that declares money and consumption as the focal point of life, no one can really be astonished to experience acts like the one in Newton. It is still not weapons that kill, it is humans who use them. Discussing legal changes is discussing symptoms, we rather should discuss the reasons. It is, perhaps, really too easy to obtain guns in the US, which should not be too difficult to change. But no one should cherish the illusion to having the problem solved by prohibiting weapons like some stupid german politicians do. This problem is a very complex one, based on the social fundamentals of human society structures. Here is the point to start.

**yang guang** 19 December 2012

Lotus Land of the free (GUN) I don't know why anyone from other countries would want to live in the US or go to School there. Very corrupt society.

**Vijay Arangasamy @palmtreecorp** 18 December 2012

Is not CT having stricter gun laws in the country, could someone throw some light on this?

**Stephen Stanley** 18 December 2012

Talk is cheap, action is another thing all together. The US is a gun state of the world. The NRA and its allies have integrated the US Political system to a point that all laws that are made will favour this Political Entity (NRA). These same people are the biggest manufactures of guns in the world.

The manufactures also supply other nations and countries with weapons. The real problem is written in there old and antiquated Constitution, which makes it legal for every citizen of the US to carry a weapon. The USA has been at war for many times in the last decade. This kind of war like mentality breeds people to carry a gun. The parents of this kind of society teach their children to fire a gun. The Law makers can talk about new gun control law, but this will do nothing to stop the guns from getting into the hands of these crazy people who committee crimes against humanity. It is a black plague in the USA to allow organizations like the NRA and its allies to operate and too lobby governments. No one in the US government has the know how or wants to change the old Constitution on the gun. People who oppose to gun control, are usually shoot at; or somehow lose there supporters, money talks. It is a corrupt society of the gun in the US. The gun violence in the US has spread to other countries, Canada and Mexico have seen a big increase in gun related crime. Over nine thousand people are killed yearly in the US by the gun. This is increasing every year for the last 5 years. I believe your count to be a bit off. Just last night, here in Colorado, we had a murder-suicide that took five lives. It isn't just the big flashy tragic incidents like Newtown, it's hundreds of fatalities a day. We are a violent society, it appears, and we have the tools to exercise our violence, guaranteed by a poorly-worded sentence in a two hundred year old document.

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Alexandros Liakopoulos @alexliako 18 December 2012

While US Global Politics are Guns Oriented, can the US government afford to lose all the well-trained-on-guns criminals that serve as US soldiers abroad in order to counterbalance their criminal sentence? This is the question!

Not to be misunderstood by anyone: I do not imply all US soldiers are criminals in the US; just saying a proportion of them are, while the very large proportion also come from poor neighbors and ghettos, where "gun-training" is an everyday-life activity. According to US "Deep State", this is a vital asset in producing "fighters of the democracy". Can they afford to lose that asset? Most probably they can, now that War goes remote.

The analysis of prof Sachs is very interesting, but one should also deal with the impact of US society's gun-culture to the rest of the world, while US politics (reflecting politicians' culture) do affect the rest of the world by "gun power" de facto. That would also give an extra argument to people arguing against US gun-madness. "Treating" US society against this very "bad habit" is of vital importance to everyone on the planet; the sooner it is done, the sooner the US and the rest of the world will stop facing the kind of tragedy of mass murders of any kind, wherever they may occur on the planet and whoever may be responsible. Taking guns out of our everyday life, may take guns out of everyday politics at the world level and war at of the question. At least, this is a hope we should all fight for if we plan to create a better world to live in, instead of taking apart the one we have, as we do today!

Heera Lal @heeralalpcs 18 December 2012

USA can adopt Indian model of gun control. Our arms control act can be adopted by USA with due amendments.

paul kosmas 18 December 2012

I would like to see your source for this claim that loners with paranoid tendencies are the most common profile, and that their actions are for self-glorification.

VannD Chheang 18 December 2012

America may be father of democracy but baby in guy ban policy

Raj Thamotheram @RajThamotheram 18 December 2012

And this pattern continues today in many parts of the world and is legitimated by the bi-partisan consensus over US foreign/military policy.


Raj Thamotheram @RajThamotheram 18 December 2012

I found this oped by Rabbi Lerner really helpful about the importance of going beyond gun control (important as it is) to the deep cultural roots of violence: http://bit.ly/UoHnkx
17. **Commented**

**Raj Thamotheram @RajThamotheram** 18 December 2012

Good to see (Australian) Rupert Murdoch highlight the difference between the two countries and speak out in favour of gun control: huff.to/XzdEpN

Of course, we will need to wait to see if Fox News and WSJ give gun control serious editorial backing before we conclude this is not just a good personal PR exercise.

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18. **Commented**

**Yoshimichi Moriyama** 17 December 2012

I do not know well about American society and culture, and so I do not think I can say anything definite.

Some years ago in Japan a man, in his thirties if I remember correctly, went into an elementary school and killed a number of children. The motive was that he wanted to die and that he wanted to be sentenced to death penalty (meaning that he did not have the courage to kill himself).

Japanese society has lost a cultural code of honor. Once we used to think that it was a despicable act of dishonor to bully the weaker, something like a code of honorable manliness though this phraseology might well get women lib fighters angry. The Japanese above mentioned was a case in point. From what he said to the police he did not have a sort of cultural upbringing, perhaps because society had lost it.

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19. **Commented**

**Roy Niles** 17 December 2012

As of now, we in the US can't ban all guns - it's supposedly unconstitutional as you know. So it would be much better to suggest we ban assault weapons, which we can do, but must do on a national rather than on a State by State basis. Some States of course already do this, but Connecticut apparently did not. And if it did, there are neighboring States that didn't.

We must also recognize that we've tried and failed to do this type of banning before. So we can't be optimistic that it will be possible this time. Unless we're willing to make the most determined effort ever made to do it now.

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20. **Commented**

**Bruce Woych** 17 December 2012

"American violence is rooted in history."

AMERICAN freedom is rooted in revolution and revolutions are not always violent. It is a really dumb generalization to say that the instruments of weaponry are uniquely involved in conquest. This is twisted logic. Imperial domination and violent force is in the hands of opportunists, and opportunists are also in classical economics. A great deal of "violence" and suppression can be placed at the door of American Economists too. Does that mean that American violence is rooted in Economics? I think THAT statement is just as accurate as the generalization you espoused too hastily. The vast majority of people that historically became this United States, Canada, Central America and South America sought freedom from violence. It was a minority of greed seeking power classes that led with violent intent. These still exist in proportion today, and we have 9as you know, exported this political-military economic class
You and economics ARE a big part of that history as much as the NRA itself. Markets Kill all over the world. The myth that markets are making people make big deals that end up ultimately wiping out entire ways of living...making them market dependent and in excruciating poverty IS history.

Economic Cold warfare IS history. The billion dollar industry of virtual warfare through extremely graphic violent computer games is reality. The trillion dollar wars are reality. Economic markets in the arms trade and the black markets in the making of large scale internal wars from killing people! That's reality...and the Big Money interests of the NRA are clearly only ONE of those markets. So let's not go back in history, let us talk today! WHO owns this reality ..., and WHO SERVES THEM?

The hypocrisy involved in the difference in value attributed to American vs. Asian or African children is disgusting. There are fairly regular incidents of innocents, often children, being killed in our military adventures, and there is no hue and cry - they are considered collateral damage.

This U.S. is blackening its soul with its military action and drone terrorism abroad.

2. Commented

Seán Fitzgerald 18 December 2012

Granted. But the point here is that, at the very least, ordinary citizens should not have ready access to weapons designed for maximum impact in war zones lest they be deployed against their fellow citizens.

22. Commented

Richard Solomon 17 December 2012

This analysis makes sense but is missing one key element: more effective oversight of individuals with mental illness. Many, if not most, of the perpetrators of these mass shootings have received psychiatric treatment. Almost always there are signs of worsening symptoms, decline in functioning before these individuals erupt into violence. Treatment providers, family members, teachers, friends need to alert authorities when concerns arise about the stability of these individuals. Additionally, these individuals should NOT have ready access to weapons. Parents of these youth must overcome their denial about this. Or else the parents should be held liable when their child goes off and kills others.

23. Commented

Battles Atlas 17 December 2012

Is there any evidential basis for this piece? Wealth inequality is strongly tied to violence by mountains of empirical evidence, and gets no mention by Sachs. Its growth in the US follows the trend for mass murders. Similarly the absence of welfare and affordable healthcare in the US means a lot of mentally ill people go untreated, this gets barely a passing mention. However slavery and colonialism are afford whole paragraphs showing that the US has a uniquely violent history! Seriously Prof Sachs? Did you miss World War I and II during your history lessons? Us Europeans have a pretty violent history in our own backyard.

24. Commented
Thomas Haynie 17 December 2012

This here author writes treason against "Amerkan furdom". The answer is MORE guns.

Commented

Robert DePree 17 December 2012

Mass killings are committed by loners, selfishly acting out the anguish of their frustrated lives. The world pays attention to their final act of revenge as it never did to their pathetic lives. These extremely maladjusted people could comprise 1 in 100,000 - maybe 3,000 disturbed people nationwide.

Their decision to act out their vengeful fantasies has nothing to do with the availability of guns. Firebombs, explosives, or poison are reasonable alternatives. The Columbine shooters back up plan was propane bombs.

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The U.S. has 10 times the average rate among high GDP nations according to this article: http://www.politifact.com/virginia/statements/2012/jan/27/jim-moran/rep-jim-moran-says-us-gun-homicide-rate-20-times-h/rob denehy 17 December 2012

The American Prospect previously ran an article promoting gun control, it said, 'For example, according to a study in the New England Journal of Medicine, during the nine years after the District of Columbia enacted a handgun ban, D.C.'s gun-related homicides fell 45 percent compared with contiguous areas in Maryland and Virginia. International comparisons yield similar results. One study found that stringent gun control works, while modest regulation does not.'

The bad news: We are all disturbed individuals. Living in our society requires a high tolerance for cognitive dissonance, especially if the observer is of high intelligence. Something smells rotten to them about our society, yet they put the finger off it. Who has not felt that way sometime?

The data from the research are complex and controversial, but the bottom line is this: Whatever significantly reduces the number of handguns in general circulation—whether through culture or regulation—reduces homicides. Other measures such as waiting periods, required training for gun owners, and enhanced sentences for criminals who possess the firearms have no discernable effect.

See -- http://prospect.org/article/how-gun-control-got-murdered

Joseph Chadwick 17 December 2012

I think less emotional and more thoughtful discussions would be useful. But I guess that's true of the majority of political discourse these days.

Branding the Supreme Court's decisions as "reckless and right wing" makes one concerned that Mr. Sachs' view of truth is that his view - regardless of process, history and the inevitable uncertainty of multiple causal factors leading to an event as well as the unintended consequences of significant policies hastily decided and imposed rather than persuaded.

How about a less ideological and more thoughtful discussion?

chrisopher tingus 17 December 2012

The Right to bear arms for all lawful purpose is very much inherent in our 2nd Amendment Rights and self-protection which is essential always and especially at a time when societies globally are besieged by "enthusranged" government and failed leadership affording little hope for economic recovery and jobs, jobs and jobs as clearly depicted by Barry Obama and the ineffectiveness of this WH administration.

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- Gun control after Newtown?

rob denehy 17 December 2012

Let's begin with some real facts - the US has the highest gun ownership rate in the world at 88 out of 1200 and has only rate of 2.97 per 100,000 anc rates no. 28 in global rankings - Americans are very responsible for their personal protection which is essential always and especially at a time when societies globally are besieged by "enthusranged" government and failed leadership affording little hope for economic recovery and jobs, jobs and jobs as clearly depicted by Barry Obama and the ineffectiveness of this WH administration.

The preponderance of military action video games is abhorrent to me, and promotes unreal world thinking. I suggest that in a society where the preponderance of media is video games and music that promotes a mentality of death and destruction - it shouldn't be a surprise to see such a mentality in the preponderance of video games and music.

Joe St. Clair spirit in enterprise and well folks, cut backs as we have seen in mental health care far much the causde of the CT atrocity which was inspired by a disturbed child a decade prior! It's the result of a media and mental health care system that has failed in its duty. I don't believe that can be predicted, and the burden of proof is on the gun advocates to prove me wrong. Anyone that really loves their country and children can't help but tremble at the thought.

32. Commented

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The preponderance of military action video games is abhorrent to me, and promotes unreal world thinking. I suggest that in a society where the preponderance of media is video games and music that promotes a mentality of death and destruction - it shouldn't be a surprise to see such a mentality in the preponderance of video games and music.
Devoid of leadership and guidance, our society has lost its way and the dysfunction of vested interest groups has led to a breakdown in civil discourse. The solution is not to blame the guns, but to demand that all citizens be responsible and that the government prioritize public safety. The problem is not with guns but with our society.

The cultural force might be better described as a "frontier" philosophy, where everything is up for grabs, and the idea of personal responsibility is paramount. This is a dangerous and self-destructive mindset that leads to a disregard for the well-being of others. The government must take responsibility for the safety of its citizens and work towards a system that prioritizes public safety over personal ownership of firearms.

The problem is not with our society but with the枪支. The government's failure to control the flow of illegal firearms has led to a culture of violence and fear. The government must take steps to address this issue and ensure that the public is safe.

The government's failure to act on this issue is a reflection of its weak leadership and its inability to prioritize the well-being of its citizens. The government must take responsibility for the safety of its citizens and work towards a system that prioritizes public safety over personal ownership of firearms.

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**Ted Peters 17 December 2012**

I am very, very disappointed in the likes of Barry Obama, Hillary Clinton and soon, John Kerry, a weakened President who has been so strong in the past. People have been killed while doing what they love, while praying the country they love, mourning their loved ones, and their pain at a loss of innocence. We will again be fighting to defend and write the Second Amendment and the three operative words: a well-regulated Militia. We have to know that the Second Amendment is not装饰性的. It is vital. It states that the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed. It is the People, the People that made the Constitution. It is the People who will make America great again. We will fight with all our might for the Second Amendment, and we will not be intimidated. We will not allow the politicians who are out of touch with the American people to take away our rights.

**PROCYON MUKHERJEE 17 December 2012**

Tragic events like this have passed with a perverse contingency as we have silently watched at the perfidious obituary of all kind with my moist eyes, nothing brought back any semblance of hope that the repeatability of these crimes could be better abated by the wisdom of the majority who do not make laws, but help to lead the
argument where wisdom should be.