

The real tragedy of America's gun violence

By Fareed Zakaria December 8, 2013. Published on CNN.com

It's almost a year since the [tragedy at Newtown](#), yet remarkably little has changed. Despite the loss of 26 lives in the Sandy Hook School shooting that day, including 20 children, Washington has failed to coalesce around any really substantive changes to America's gun laws. Sadly, that means it is only a matter of time before the next mass shooting.

As part of a GPS special on the issue, we went all over the world in search of solutions and lessons that we might apply here to bring down the epidemic of gun violence that afflicts us. We saw many interesting ideas that worked, all of them centering around some simple, common sense ideas that would put some checks on the unfettered sale and possession of firearms.

What we did not find was a large-scale, nationwide example where expanded attention to mental health issues could be tied to a reduction in homicides or suicides using guns.

This might surprise you. Every time there is a serious gun massacre in the United States – and alas these are fairly common – the media focuses on the twisted psychology of the shooter and asks why we don't pay more attention to detecting and treating mental illness.

But as people like Gen. Peter Chiarelli told me – and he was tasked by the United States armed forces to look into this issue – while you can identify mental issues and be aware of reasons for stress, it is ultimately impossible to predict who among the many under pressure will snap, when that might be, and what form that break will take.

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The question we should really be focused on is not the specific cause of a single shooting, but why there are so many of them in America. To remind you, in recent years there have been around 10,000 gun homicides a year in the United States. According to the United States, in Germany and Canada, there were fewer than 200. In Spain, fewer than 100. In Australia fewer than 50.

America's per capita gun homicide rate in 2009 was 12 times higher than the average of Canada, Germany, Australia and Spain. Does anyone think that we have 12 times as many psychologically troubled people as they do in these countries?

There are other reasons often given for gun violence – popular culture and violent video games in particular. But as this survey across the world should have shown, countries that imbibe much the same gory culture in Europe and

Australia have much lower levels of violence. Japan, with its particular fascination with violent video games, is actually stunningly low in gun deaths. So whatever you think of violent video games and movies, they don't seem to be the key cause of gun violence.

And we do have an actual experiment. In the aftermath of its own Newtown-like massacre, Australia changed its gun laws. The result? Homicides and suicides plummeted in the decade that followed. Of course, like all real world problems, the link between guns and violence is a complex issue. But one rarely has so much evidence pointing in the same direction.

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That finally leaves the issue of the American Constitution – the argument that the Second Amendment makes any kind of serious gun control impossible. I am not a legal historian, but I will note that many serious ones have pointed out that the Second Amendment was not invoked much for much of American history, often applied only to “well-regulated militias,” and for many decades did not stand in the way of sensible gun regulation. And the Supreme Court upheld such regulation. All that started to change in the 1970s and '80s as part of a spirited political movement to make gun rights inviolable.

As I said, I'm not a lawyer. But listen to someone who was: Warren Burger. He was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court for 17 years, a conservative Republican appointed by Richard Nixon. Here's what he said about the Second Amendment:

“This has been the subject of one of the greatest pieces of fraud, I repeat the word ‘fraud,’ on the American public by special interest groups that I have ever seen in my lifetime. Now just look at those words. There are only three lines to that amendment. A ‘well-regulated militia’ – if the militia, which was going to be the state army, was going to be well regulated, why shouldn't 16 and 17 and 18 or any other age persons be regulated in the use of arms the way an automobile is regulated...someone asked me recently if I was for or against a bill that was pending in Congress calling for five days waiting period, and I said I'm very much against it. It should be 30 days waiting period.”

But let's get away from the legal issues. Here's how I think about it. One of the most important tasks for a government is to keep its citizens – especially its children – safe, on the streets and in their schools. Every other developed country in the world is able to fulfill this basic mandate. America is not. And the greatest tragedy is that we know how to do it.