

<http://tinyurl.com/a8b4bj4> Washington Post - September 19, 2012

The solution to gun violence is clear

By Fareed Zakaria, December 19, 2012

Announcing Wednesday that he would send proposals on reducing gun violence in America to Congress, President Obama mentioned a number of sensible gun-control measures. But he also paid homage to the Washington conventional wisdom about the many and varied causes of this calamity — from mental health issues to school safety. His spokesman, Jay Carney, had said earlier that this is “a complex problem that will require a complex solution.” Gun control, Carney added, is far from the only answer.

In fact, the problem is not complex, and the solution is blindingly obvious.

People point to three sets of causes when talking about events such as the Newtown, Conn., shootings. First, the psychology of the killer; second, the environment of violence in our popular culture; and, third, easy access to guns. Any one of these might explain a single shooting. What we should be trying to understand is not one single event but why we have so many of them. The number of deaths by firearms in the United States was 32,000 last year. Around 11,000 were gun homicides.

To understand how staggeringly high this number is, compare it to the rate in other rich countries. England and Wales have about 50 gun homicides a year — 3 percent of our rate per 100,000 people. Many people believe that America is simply a more violent, individualistic society. But again, the data clarify. For most crimes — theft, burglary, robbery, assault — the United States is within the range of other advanced countries. The category in which the U.S. rate is magnitudes higher is gun homicides.

The U.S. gun homicide rate is *30 times* that of France or Australia, according to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, and 12 times higher than the average for other developed countries.

So what explains this difference? If psychology is the main cause, we should have 12 times as many psychologically disturbed people. But we don't. The United States could do better, but we take mental disorders seriously and invest more in this area than do many peer countries.

Is America's popular culture the cause? This is highly unlikely, as largely the same culture exists in other rich countries. Youth in England and Wales, for example, are exposed to virtually identical cultural influences as in the United States. Yet the rate of gun homicide there is a tiny fraction of ours. The Japanese are at the cutting edge of the world of video games. Yet their gun homicide rate is close to zero! Why? Britain has tough gun laws. Japan has perhaps the tightest regulation of guns in the industrialized world.

The data in social science are rarely this clear. They strongly suggest that we have so much more gun violence than other countries because we have far more permissive laws than others regarding the sale and possession of guns. With 5 percent of the world's population, the United States has 50 percent of the guns.

There is clear evidence that tightening laws — even in highly individualistic countries with long traditions of gun ownership — can reduce gun violence. In Australia, after a 1996 ban on all automatic and semiautomatic weapons — a real ban, not like the one we enacted in 1994 with 600-

plus exceptions — gun-related homicides dropped 59 percent over the next decade. The rate of suicide by firearm plummeted 65 percent. (Almost 20,000 Americans die each year using guns to commit suicide — a method that is much more successful than other forms of suicide.)

There will always be evil or disturbed people. And they might be influenced by popular culture. But how is government going to identify the darkest thoughts in people's minds before they have taken any action? Certainly those who urge that government be modest in its reach would not want government to monitor thoughts, curb free expression, and ban the sale of information and entertainment.

Instead, why not have government do something much simpler and that has proven successful: limit access to guns. And not another toothless ban, riddled with exceptions, which the gun lobby would use to “prove” that such bans don't reduce violence.

A few hours before the Newtown murders last week, a man entered a school in China's Henan province. Obviously mentally disturbed, he tried to kill children. But the only weapon he was able to get was a knife. Although 23 children were injured, not one child died.

The problems that produced the Newtown massacre are not complex, nor are the solutions. We do not lack for answers.

What we lack in America today is courage.