

Broader background checks and denial criteria could help prevent mass shooting catastrophes

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Garen Wintemute, a leading authority on gun violence prevention and an emergency medicine physician at UC Davis, believes broader criteria for background checks and denials on gun purchases can help prevent future firearm violence, including mass shooting catastrophes such as those that occurred at Sandy Hook, Aurora, Virginia Tech and Columbine.

"To reduce the number of deaths and injuries from firearms in the United States, we need to develop policies that require background checks for all firearm purchases, including private-party sales—the most important source of firearms for criminal buyers and others who are prohibited from purchasing guns," said Wintemute, director of the UC Davis Violence Prevention Research Program and inaugural Susan P. Baker-Stephen P. Teret Chair in Violence Prevention at UC Davis.

"We need to prevent individuals with a previous conviction for a misdemeanor violent crime, such as assault and battery, from purchasing or possessing a firearm. We also need to develop better data and criteria that allow us to distinguish between those with a treatable [mental disorder](#) who do not have a history of violence from those with a history of violence or substance abuse," he said.

Wintemute's views posted on the Online First section of the [New England Journal of Medicine](#) website as a Perspective article, entitled "Tragedy's Legacy," on December 26, 2012. It also will appear in the

journal's January 31, 2013 print edition.

According to Wintemute, the United States represents only 5 percent of the world's population, but it owns more than 40 percent of all firearms that are in civilians' hands. In addition, he believes that policies governing gun purchases and use have allowed the widest possible array of firearms to be available to the widest group of people, for use under the widest array of conditions. Wintemute specifically cites the "Stand Your Ground" laws, enacted at the state level, as dangerous experiments that have been used to legitimize shootings that once were considered to be murder.

Wintemute emphasizes taking a broad approach.

"It may be impossible to predict the next mass shooting incident, and we cannot expect interventions designed for specific circumstances to eliminate the risk of firearm violence. But we can change our firearms laws, based on existing evidence, to reduce harm and better ensure public safety," he said.

"Some 40 percent of all firearm transactions, for example, involve private-party sellers, who are not required to keep records and cannot obtain a background check," Wintemute said. "We need policies that prevent these quick, anonymous and undocumented sales. We also need policies that deny gun purchases to those who we know are at high risk for violence."

Wintemute's research has shown that among persons who purchase firearms legally, those with a previous conviction for a misdemeanor violent crime are roughly nine times as likely as those with no criminal history to be arrested for a violent crime later. For those with two or more such prior convictions, he found the risk increases by a factor of 10 to 15. In addition, studies have shown that firearm owners who abuse

alcohol are more likely than other owners to engage in violence-related firearm behavior.

"We know that comprehensive background checks and expanded denial criteria are feasible and effective, because they are in place in many states and have been evaluated," Wintemute said. "In California, the denial policy reduced the risk of violence and firearm-related crime by 23 percent among those whose purchases were denied. But we need to broaden these and other effective state-level regulations to eliminate the flow of firearms from states where laws are lax to states where laws are stricter."

Wintemute also notes that proposals for comprehensive [background checks](#) and denials for misdemeanor violence and for alcohol abuse enjoy broad public support, including among firearm owners. Survey data come from Wintemute's own research as well as a series of public polls conducted for the Mayors Against Illegal Guns.

"While the individual circumstances of the mass shooting massacres in the U.S. are different, we can only change the outcome if we confront the challenge of unchecked and easy access to firearms," Wintemute said. "Strengthening our background check and denial policies for firearm purchases will not eliminate firearm [violence](#), but they can reduce it."

Provided by UC Davis

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