

Mass murders: Why us? Why the U.S.?

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Photo: Kerry O'Mahony

From gun availability to a lack of therapists, experts say many factors contribute to the spate of killings.

(HealthDay)—The recent rash of mass shootings is raising pointed questions about why America is experiencing such carnage. And, while the answers are complex, policymakers are capitalizing on public fervor over last week's massacre in Newtown, Conn., to muster support for new initiatives to prevent future tragedies.

President [Barack Obama](#) on Wednesday announced plans to revisit the nation's gun and mental health laws, tapping Vice President Joseph Biden to lead an effort to bring "concrete proposals" to the table for quick action in January. In part, the president supports reinstating the ban on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition cartridges. These prohibitions expired in 2004 with the sunset of the 10-year-old Federal Assault Weapons Ban.

In the past two years alone, killing sprees have claimed dozens of lives and left many injured and disabled:

- Six perished and 13 were injured in front of a Tucson, Ariz., grocery store in January 2011 when a lone gunman, wielding a legally obtained handgun, sprayed the crowd with bullets and, in an assassination attempt, shot former Congresswoman [Gabrielle Giffords](#) in the head, nearly taking her life.
- Five students at Chardon High School in Ohio sustained [gunshot wounds](#) this February and three of them died at the hands of the accused 17-year-old gunman who allegedly chose his victims at random. The murder weapon was a handgun reportedly stolen from the suspect's uncle.
- A gunman opened fire in an Aurora, Colo., movie theater in July, killing 12 and injuring dozens more. The alleged 24-year-old shooter had legally obtained four weapons, including a semi-automatic assault rifle used during the attack.
- A gunman killed six and wounded four in August at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wis., before a police officer shot and killed the 40-year-old suspect at the scene. The shooter legally purchased the semi-automatic handgun and ammunition used in the attack.

The latest tragedy, the Dec. 14 massacre of 20 young schoolchildren and six educators at a Newtown, Conn., elementary school, has stunned the nation, inciting a call to action.

And as policymakers grapple for answers, experts point to personal and societal problems that could be underpinning these deadly events.

"It's not one factor," explained Jeffrey Swanson, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Duke University School of

Medicine in Durham, N.C. "I think it's almost impossible to predict who would do a thing like this, in advance," he added.

Newtown's Sandy Hook Elementary now ranks as the second deadliest school shooting in the United States, after the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre, which claimed 32 lives. Sandy Hook's death toll eclipses the carnage that shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold inflicted upon 13 classmates in the infamous 1999 Columbine High School rampage.

School shootings not unique to the United States

Yet school-based shootings are not a uniquely American phenomenon. Even with Europe's tougher gun laws, Finland, France, Germany and Norway have all experienced atrocities in the past decade. Mass school-based shootings at two German schools in 2002 and 2009 claimed a total of 31 victims.

Despite the public outcry spurred by the killings, the United States is not becoming an increasingly homicidal nation. The reality is the U.S. murder rate, at least through last year, has been on a downward slope. The Federal Bureau of Investigation reports a steady decline in total homicides, from 14,990 in 2006 to 12,664 in 2011.

"We are still a relatively safe country and certainly by historical standards, even with these mass killings, our homicide rates are lower now than they were in the '80s. So we do need to keep this in perspective," said James Hawdon, professor of sociology and director of the Center for Peace Studies and Violence Prevention at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg.

Still, guns figure prominently in the nation's murder rate. From 2006 to 2011, the percentage of homicides involving some type of firearm remained almost unchanged over the period, at 68 percent, according to

FBI data.

And the firearm death rate in the United States is nearly 6.5 times higher than Canada's rate of just 0.5 per 100,000 people, the United Nations reports.

"Our peer countries regulate the guns . . . and they tend to have far lower homicide rates than we do," said Duke's Swanson.

Australia in 1996 enacted a gun buyback program in response to a massacre in Tasmania that left 35 dead. The result: Gun-related homicides declined from 0.57 per 100,000 people in 1996 to 0.1 per 100,000 people in 2009, according to GunPolicy.org.

In Japan, known for its restrictive gun-control laws, the total number of guns held by civilians is estimated to be 710,000, or 0.6 firearms per 100 people, according to data compiled by GunPolicy.org. In the United States, it's 270 million total guns, or 88.8 firearms per 100 people.

People who study violent behavior point to the widespread availability of guns in America, particularly assault weapons like the ones used in Newtown, Conn., that are designed to discharge multiple rounds of ammunition, as a factor in crimes involving multiple casualties.

"There just happens to be very lethal methods available out there," said Thomas Bowers, associate professor of psychology at Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg.

Gun enthusiasts, however, argue that even the best gun control laws can't stop a person from committing a heinous act. Connecticut laws restricting the sale, ownership and use of guns are considered among the most stringent in the nation.

"None of these bans was efficacious in keeping Adam Lanza [the Newtown school shooter] from killing 20 children," said Michael Hammond, legislative counsel to the Gun Owners of America in Springfield, Va.

Police said Lanza used guns—a semi-automatic rifle and two handguns—that belonged to his mother, who was found dead in their home.

The National Rifle Association broke its silence on the Newtown tragedy on Wednesday with a statement explaining that "we have given time for mourning, prayer and a full investigation of the facts before commenting." The Washington, D.C.-based gun lobby announced plans for a "major news conference" on Friday.

Professing not to be a gun control fanatic, Christopher Ferguson, associate professor and chair of the department of psychology and communication at Texas A&M University in Laredo, believes gun access is part of the problem. "We may be getting to a point where we need to sit down and talk about what we can do to make things a little safer," he said.

The problem isn't just guns, experts say

Guns are only part of the equation, Ferguson said. There's also a need to improve the nation's mental health system so that individuals at risk get the help they need.

While no firm profile of school shooters has emerged, Ferguson said some common characteristics include a long history of anti-social traits, mental health problems such as depression or psychosis, and the perception that others are to blame for their problems, that "society didn't give me a chance."

A 2007 report commissioned by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found many gaps in the mental health system, "including a critical shortage of all child and adolescent providers," Dr. Howard Liu, medical director of the Behavioral Health Education Center of Nebraska at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha, told *HealthDay*.

In the report, the federal government projected a need for 12,624 child and adolescent psychiatrists by 2020, vastly exceeding the projected supply of 8,312. The shortage of trained mental health providers is particularly acute in rural and low-income areas.

Could the way Americans live and raise children today also play a role in triggering violent behavior?

Many people speculate that violent video games predispose kids to aggressive and dangerous behavior. Ferguson's research indicates that that's not true. In a laboratory setting, short-term exposure to violent videos neither increased nor decreased aggression, while long-term exposure was associated with reduced hostile feelings and depression following a stressful task, one study found.

What's more, Ferguson said, "Video games are not a commonality among school shooters."

Dale Yeager, a criminal behavioral analyst and CEO of SERAPH, a Berwyn, Pa.-based legal, liability and security consulting firm, believes that dysfunction in families—from broken marriages to a "pop psychology" culture that coddles kids instead of teaching right from wrong—is at the root of the problem.

"What happens is mommy or daddy or both are not taking care of their issues and that filters down to the children," he said.

As people try to make sense of the latest tragic events, Virginia Tech's Hawdon offers this advice: "Really the way that we can best control crime and best reduce violence is by looking out for each other, by having a community where people know each other, people are involved in each other's lives to the point where they can say, 'You seem to be having difficulties right now' and 'Can I help?'"

More information: There's more on mental health at the [U.S. National Library of Medicine](#).

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