

How Shameful Policies Increase America's Gun Violence

By: Trevor Burrus – January 30, 2012

This week, a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing asks the question, "what should America do about gun violence?" As usual, the primary focus is on guns rather than those who misuse them, but unfortunately both President Obama's and Sen. Dianne Feinstein's proposals will do little to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. There are 300 million guns in America, and, without a politically impossible and undesirable program of mass confiscation, it will continue to be quite easy for wrongdoers to get weapons in America. Perhaps, instead of trying to extract a thimbleful of water from that ocean of weapons, we should shift our focus to why so many Americans want to harm each other.

Studies of gun violence often use a compare-and-contrast methodology to find variables between nations that may explain a difference in violent crime rates. Many of the proposed causes for America's uniquely violent culture -- from video games to taking God out of schools -- have little scientific backing and seem like irrelevant squabbles over tastes and preferences. Yet government programs that do real, measurable harm to our citizens and predictably push them toward gun violence are too often overlooked.

First and foremost is the oppressive and ineffective drug war that has destroyed inner-city neighborhoods and severely harmed the life prospects of millions of Americans, most acutely, young, African-American men.

As Prohibition-era America showed, banning a highly in-demand substance increases the violence surrounding that substance. When legal methods cannot be used to settle contract and other disputes, extra-legal methods (i.e., the point of a gun) will be used. Moreover, unsavory characters will tend to traffic the prohibited substances, further escalating violent business practices. These new businessmen also facilitate the illegal gun trade, brazenly ignoring assault weapons bans and other cosmetic limits on gun ownership. Those guns then flood the black market, giving easy access to would-be criminals and mass shooters. A 2001 Justice Department study found that 20 percent of prison inmates received their guns from a drug dealer or off the street. Comparatively, only 0.7 percent of the weapons were obtained at gun shows. Which "loophole" should we be focusing on closing?

Caught in the middle of this is the American citizen, particularly young, black males, who often grow up in inner cities that have more in common with war zones than suburban neighborhoods. The U.S. government's "solution" to this problem has been mass incarceration

on a level rarely seen in world history; with a prison rate currently six to 10 times the rate of any other developed country. In many American inner cities where the drug war is most earnestly waged, up to 80 percent of young African-American males have criminal records. These young men will endure a lifetime of legalized discrimination, and difficulty finding employment, often because they simply chose to put a prohibited substance into their own bodies.

The devastation wreaked by these policies upon the African-American community is astounding. A robust sense of community -- a sense of belonging, a sense of responsibility for your fellow citizens -- is one of the best mollifiers for interpersonal violence. Yet, for decades the American government's policies have been systematically destroying families and communities, mostly African-American, through an immoral and endless drug war.

As if to dig the knife deeper in the wound, the government offers the children living in these communities a "way out" in the form of a moribund and pitiful public school system. Students are quite literally trapped in their local, geographically designated school, and parents who try to rescue their children from gang-ridden schools by manipulating their legal place of residence can be sent to prison. As a virtual monopoly, the ineffective schools lack sufficient incentives to adequately serve students.

The grossly inadequate education system, coupled with the drug war, is a devastating one-two punch. If the U.S. government were trying to destroy inner-city communities and diminish the life prospects of millions of people, it could hardly do better than hit them with this destructive pincer maneuver. Similarly, the government could scarcely improve its strategy if it were trying to systematically increase gun violence in America over the course of 50 years.

Left with few avenues to better their situation, inner-city children increasingly turn to the drug trade and other types of criminal activities that offer better immediate futures than staying in useless schools, and then often find themselves caught by the war on drugs. Generations of inner-city children are denied meaningful avenues to better themselves and have few role models to look up to.

America's unique level of gun violence is not something to scratch our heads at as if it is a bolt from the blue -- it is partially the expected outcome of immoral and ineffective government policies.

Tragedies like Sandy Hook cause us to hold a mirror up to our society, and when it comes to gun violence in America, we don't like what we see. The gun murder rate in America is 20 times the average for developed countries, and we react to this with a mixture of confusion and shame. Yet some causes of America's violent culture are not so confusing, although they are certainly shameful.