



A progressive push for more gun violence

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Who ever thought the progressive position on gun violence would be to encourage more of it?

Yet that's the paradox in Philadelphia, where on Thursday the city council will consider a bill to force owners of hundreds of small corner stores to take down glass partitions that protect their managers and clerks from being robbed and assaulted.

It's all being rationalized in the name of social justice. Watch for the idea to show up in New York, too.

Philadelphia has hundreds of convenience stores known as "stop and gos." Some are licensed as restaurants, which lets them sell beer and shots for consumption on premises, but means they're supposed to have 30 seats and serve food. Critics say many skirt those rules, making most of their money from beer, cigarettes and packaged snacks. They have drawn fire from neighborhood-improvement commissions as magnets for petty sidewalk offenses like loitering and the sale of "loosie" cigarettes.

Councilwoman Cindy Bass, who's sponsoring the measure, calls the establishments "quasi liquor stores" and says they can stay in business as delis if they stop "masquerading as restaurants" and operate under a different kind of license. Otherwise they'll need to offer customer bathrooms accessible without walking through a food-preparation area and — the sticking point — remove physical barriers between food servers and customers.

Some insist enforcing existing state law would be enough to shutter or fine the pretend restaurants and nuisance operators. But on one point, Bass is implacable: "the plexiglass has to come down."

Here it becomes clear that zoning and liquor control aren't the only things on her mind.

"Have you ever been served food at a sit-down restaurant establishment through a solid barrier? That is not acceptable." There's an "indignity" to it, she adds, and it happens "only in certain neighborhoods." Hence: "No more normalization of receiving food or drink through a prison-like solitary confinement window. What message does it send our children? What are we conditioning them for?"

Well, it sends several messages.

One is a moral that echoes down through the ages: Human beings threatened with violence have the right to protect themselves.

Another is that no matter how many of your neighbors may be personally liked and trusted, it takes only a few bad actors for you to live in a rough neighborhood. Acting as if it isn't — or that police will always arrive in time to stop an assault — is playing pretend.

Predictably, some of the store managers say if their glass comes down they will start carrying guns to defend themselves.

At least 230 owners are Asian, including Korean, Chinese and Vietnamese immigrant families. More than 200 attended a Dec. 4 hearing to protest the bill.

Adam Xu, president of the Asian-American Licensed Beverage Association, said his group was willing to live with all the elements of the bill except the plexiglass ban. Rich Kim, whose family has owned a deli for 20 years, said the glass in his shop “went up after a shooting and claims it saved his mother-in-law from a knife attack,” according to one account.

If the bill passes, “there will be lots of dead bodies.”

Testifying on the other side was a figure well known to New Yorkers, Philadelphia Health Commissioner Tom Farley, who formerly held a similar post under New York's Mayor Mike Bloomberg.

Farley seemed to be straining in his public-health rationale, though: he said a barrier might cost precious seconds if a customer needed employee help after choking or an allergic reaction.

Farley is often quoted in the press demanding stronger government action to reduce gun violence. But that's what the barriers deter. Philadelphia has a shooting every six hours, to say nothing of knifings and strong-arm robberies.

The barriers reduce theft, too.

Yet the bill won committee approval at the Dec. 4 hearing, though amended so as to phase in the ban over three years. The editors of the Philadelphia Inquirer can't make it any plainer in their headline: “Philly's proposed bulletproof glass ban could get someone shot.”

Even with a crime rate much lower than Philly's, New York City still has plenty of stores with partitions. Want to bet this bad idea doesn't show up here before long?

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