



## Our Opinion: Who we allow to carry a gun is the issue

December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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Today's editorial was going to urge the legislature to pass a sensible law allowing Illinoisans to carry concealed weapons after a federal appellate court ruled to do so is a constitutional right.

We were going to write about the regional tensions and how Chicago lawmakers don't respect downstate's culture and desire for such a law and how the National Rifle Association blithely dismisses the violence in Chicago and its leaders' fear that concealed carry will make it worse.

That all seems ridiculously trivial in light of the 20 small children and eight adults shot and killed in the most appalling mass shooting this country has ever seen. After Friday, who we allow to carry a concealed weapon isn't the issue. It's now about whom we allow to own a gun in the first place.

The Newtown massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School is going to change our discussion on guns in this country. It has to.

Having an apparent madman walk into a school and kill 20 grade-school children is so horrific and unthinkable that it demands that we toss aside the warmed-over talking points that have dominated this debate for 20 years. Having 20 young children's lives stolen should make us insist on starting this discussion from scratch.

It also has to be a discussion about our culture, about how some of us seem to revel in confrontation, incivility and sometimes violence. We duke it out in the middle of the night on Black Friday over cheap stuff we don't need. Children and adults play video games where increasingly lifelike people die gruesome deaths. Our politicians tape campaign commercials about how they're going to "fight" for this or that or against this person or that group. Gun ownership rates are high in Switzerland and Israel, according to the [Cato Institute](#), yet they have low homicide rates. Why?

But a culture change can't be legislated. Sensible gun laws can. Some will say it's too early to talk about the public policy changes that should result from this tragedy.

That's what they said after the 2011 massacre in Arizona that killed six, including a federal judge, in an assassination attempt on Rep. Gabrielle Giffords. That's what they said in July after 12 people were killed and 58 injured in a movie theater shooting in Aurora, Colo.

If we can't talk about it now, days after the country watched sobbing children describe on national television how they hid in a closet from a rampaging gunman, when would be a good time?

Clearly, the current system of federal background checks on people seeking to purchase guns is not weeding out those who should not have them. If only mental health care were as available and easy to obtain as a gun. One law enforcement official told CNN on Friday that it was time for the country to accept that much more rigorous mental health screenings are needed for gun buyers, such as those given to police recruits.

On Thursday, we would have dismissed that suggestion as too cumbersome and costly. But after six mass shootings in a year (in which four or more people were killed) and 61 since 1982, according to research done by **Mother Jones magazine**, it has to be considered. In 49 of the incidents, the guns were obtained legally.

Congress also needs to consider the kinds of weapons that people are allowed to buy. When the types of weapons used in these mass slayings are considered, it becomes clear which ones do the most damage and are most-often used.

Of the 139 guns used in such shootings, 67 were semiautomatic handguns and 35 were assault weapons, while only 20 were shotguns and 17 were revolvers, according to Mother Jones' research.

The NRA and others who oppose further gun-control measures like to trot out that old saw: "Guns don't kill people; people kill people." The upshot is that mass shootings are simply the price of an activist Supreme Court's decision to expand our Second Amendment freedoms.

Friday showed us the price is too high. No constitutional right is absolute and the state and federal governments have a public interest in preventing this kind of extreme gun violence. Congress and the General Assembly need to act.