

## **Vortex of Violence: U.S. wealth, mental health, drugs and internet guns**

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“Violence thrives in the absence of democracy, respect for human rights and good governance.”  
—Nelson Mandela<sup>1</sup>

With more guns and deaths by gun violence than any other developed country,<sup>2</sup> the United States has gained notoriety worldwide for its culture of violence. But despite the ever-increasing number of homicides, suicides and other gun-related violence, the U.S. Congress under pressure from the gun lobby has steadfastly refused to pass laws to restrict access to handguns and other small arms. Instead, legislators have granted legal immunity to the gun manufacturers.<sup>3</sup>

Worldwide, among people aged 15 to 44 years, interpersonal violence is the third leading cause of death and suicide is the fourth, and a large portion of these deaths occur by firearms,<sup>4</sup> yet the United States stands out from the rest. In a study involving 36 wealthier nations of the world, the U.S. emerged as the leader in firearm death rates with over 14 deaths per 100,000 people, a rate that is some eight times higher than that of other so-called high-income countries. The same study stated that, when compared to other wealthy countries, firearm homicide rates in the U.S. were about 19 times higher.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the rate of U.S. gun violence seems to be accelerating; of the 25 deadliest mass shootings, 13 occurred over the last decade compared to 12 over the previous 40 years.<sup>6</sup>

The mass shootings in schools and public places are sharp indicators of how the American society as a whole is caught in a vortex of violence. While these gruesome acts of armed slaughter capture the attention of a people known worldwide for their lack of long term memory, nevertheless these public displays hide the reality that 61 percent of the deaths by gunshot in the United States are a result of suicides.<sup>7</sup> This statistic refutes the commonly held belief that gun violence is primarily perpetrated against others by individuals suffering from acute mental disorders such as depression, bipolar disease or schizophrenia, when in fact only about four percent of U.S. interpersonal violence is attributable to seriously mentally ill persons.<sup>8</sup>

Strangely enough and contrary to expectations, rates of mental illness appear to correlate fairly well with the relative wealth of a given country. According to the World Health Organization, depression is the third most significant cause of the worldwide disease burden, but it is sharply split between the haves and have-nots. While clinical (unipolar) depression is in eighth place among the so-called low-income nations, it ranks first among the wealthy countries, with almost seven percent of U.S. citizens suffering from this ailment annually. Likewise, anxiety disorders are more prevalent in developed nations with over 10 percent of the population suffering annually. Finally, of those persons afflicted by schizophrenia, around one-third attempt suicide,<sup>9</sup> and, in general, those who use guns in their attempts have the highest rates of lethal success.<sup>10</sup>

As might be expected from the inverse relationship with national affluence, mental health in the U.S., the wealthiest nation in the world,<sup>11</sup> is in an abysmal state. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only some 17 percent of the population is considered to be in a state of “optimal mental health,”<sup>12</sup> while it is estimated that some 3.5 million Americans

afflicted by serious mental disorders are unable to obtain proper treatment, which undoubtedly is a contributing factor to societal violence. While these mentally ill individuals are not the cause of America's violence epidemic, it seems logical from the standpoint of public health and safety to restrict their access to firearms.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, even placing such restrictions on everyone undergoing mental therapy would not have a significant impact on gun-related violence,<sup>14</sup> since the main causal factors are alcohol and drug use, the sheer number of guns and ease of access.<sup>15</sup>

Fighting any sensible legislation aimed at controlling the easy access to firearms, the U.S. gun lobby holds that "guns make the nation safer." Discrediting this premise, a recent study of gun violence by Drs. Sripal Bangalore and Franz H. Messerli published in the American Journal of Medicine concluded that among the 27 developed countries studied, there was a significant positive correlation between the number of guns owned and the rate of gun-related deaths, but not between mental illness and gun-related deaths. "The number of guns per capita per country was a strong and independent predictor of firearm-related death in a given country, whereas the predictive power of the mental illness burden was of borderline significance," stated the authors.<sup>16</sup> Concurring, Harvard studies also found that "where there are more guns, both men and women are at higher risk for homicide, particularly firearm homicide."<sup>17</sup>

Another myth debunked by the Bangalore and Messerli study involves the highly cherished notion that a country whose citizens are well armed is safer from crime, but to the contrary, the study found that there was no significant correlation between guns owned per capita and the country's crime rate or, for that matter, between the number of cases of mental illness and the crime rate. The doctors do point out, "There is little question that the combination of mental illness and easy access to guns may prove to be synergistic in their lethality, as was seen in the shootings in Aurora, Tucson, at Virginia Tech, in Oak Creek, and other places in recent years."<sup>18</sup>

The study by Drs. Bangalore and Messerli also suggests a vicious cycle of violence and gun ownership in the United States. On one hand, the ease of access to a wide range of firearms leads to increased numbers of gun-related deaths, and on the other hand, high rates of crimes involving firearms cause fear of being victimized, and motivate people to buy weapons to protect themselves, resulting in even greater availability of guns.<sup>19</sup> This firearm feedback loop starts with greater numbers of weapons in the hands of more people, resulting in higher numbers of gun-related fatalities, which in turn causes people to feel less safe and thus acquire even more guns. Confirming this feedback effect, a Harvard survey found that, by a three-to-one margin, Americans feel less safe as others in their communities acquire guns.<sup>20</sup>

Currently, U.S. federal law forbids the sale of firearms to anyone who was convicted of a felony or a misdemeanor crime of domestic violence, who has been committed to a mental institution or found to have a "mental defect," or who unlawfully uses or is addicted to any controlled substance. Despite numerous studies showing that alcohol use is a factor in gun violence in America, federal law fails to list it as a controlled substance like any other dangerous drug or narcotic. Moreover, conclusive evidence exists that identifies a history of alcohol consumption with greater risk of committing an act of interpersonal violence. In fact, in 37 percent of the cases of violent crime, the perpetrator was intoxicated at the time of commission. Astonishingly, over 90 percent of U.S. firearms merchants support prohibiting gun sales to persons with a history of acute alcohol consumption or alcohol-related crimes.<sup>21</sup>

However, despite widespread support for broadened restrictions and more extensive background checks, it is unlikely that this alone would prevent gun sales to violence-prone persons, much less significantly impact America's rampant violence, for two reasons. First, the majority of weapons transactions take place outside of licensed gun shops or pawnbrokers. Less than five percent of convicted felons who were prohibited from owning guns prior to incarceration bought from licensed dealers. Second, internet sites such as armslist.com greatly facilitate gun purchases since no background check of the buyer is involved.<sup>22</sup> A click on an electronic affidavit is all that is required of a would-be purchaser, who thereby accepts responsibility "for obeying all applicable enforcement mechanisms... including compliance with all applicable licensing requirements." For its part, Armslist "does not certify, investigate, or in any way guarantee the legal capacity of any party to transact."<sup>23</sup>

The United States is caught in a vortex of violence caused by a conflation of wealth, easy access to guns, alcohol consumption and illicit drug use, all of which are compounded by subpar mental health and inadequate treatment for mental disorders. This deadly combination of factors is not only causing the deaths of individual citizens and destroying American society, but also is causing a cancerous contagion of armed violence to metastasize worldwide.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi and Rafael Lozano, eds., "World report on violence and health," *World Health Organization*, 2002, accessed April 12, 2014,

[http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/world\\_report/en/introduction.pdf?ua=1](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/introduction.pdf?ua=1).

<sup>2</sup> Sydney Lupkin, "U.S. Has More Guns – And Gun Deaths – Than Any Other Country, Study Finds," *ABC News*, September 19, 2013, accessed April 12, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/health/2013/09/19/u-s-has-more-guns-and-gun-deaths-than-any-other-country-study-finds/>.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel W. Webster and Jon S. Vernick "Introduction," in *Updated Evidence and Policy Developments on Reducing Gun Violence in America*, ed. Daniel W. Webster and Jon S. Vernick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 2, accessed April 12, 2014, [http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-gun-policy-and-research/resources/digital\\_update\\_Webster\\_Vernick.pdf](http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-gun-policy-and-research/resources/digital_update_Webster_Vernick.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Andrés Villaveces, Etienne Krug, Alex Butchart and Gyanendra K Sharma "Small Arms and Global Health World Health Organization, UN Conference on Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons July 9–20, 2001, 1, accessed April 13, 2014, [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2001/WHO\\_NMH\\_VIP\\_01.1.pdf?ua=1](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2001/WHO_NMH_VIP_01.1.pdf?ua=1).

<sup>5</sup> E.G. Krug, K.E. Powell and L.L. Dahlberg, "Firearm-related deaths on the United States and 35 other high-and upper-middle-income countries," *International Journal of Epidemiology* 27 (1998):218, accessed April 13, 2014, <http://ije.oxfordjournals.org/content/27/2/214.full.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> "25 Deadliest Mass Shootings in U.S. History Fast Facts," CNN, October 26, 2013, accessed April 13, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/16/us/20-deadliest-mass-shootings-in-u-s-history-fast-facts/>.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey W. Swanson and Allison G. Robertson, "Thinking Differently about Mental Illness, Violence Risk, and Gun Rights," in *Updated Evidence and Policy Developments on Reducing Gun Violence in America*, *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey W. Swanson and Allison G. Robertson, "Thinking Differently about Mental Illness, Violence Risk, and Gun Rights," in *Updated Evidence and Policy Developments on Reducing Gun Violence in America*, *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> "Burden of Mental Illness," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 1, 2011, last modified October 4, 2013, accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/basics/burden.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Andrés Villaveces, Etienne Krug, Alex Butchart and Gyanendra K Sharma "Small Arms and Global Health," *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> "Global Wealth Report 2013," Credit Suisse, 2013, accessed April 13, 2014, [http://images.smh.com.au/file/2013/10/09/4815797/cs\\_global\\_wealth\\_report\\_2013\\_WEB\\_low%2520pdf.pdf?rand=1381288140715](http://images.smh.com.au/file/2013/10/09/4815797/cs_global_wealth_report_2013_WEB_low%2520pdf.pdf?rand=1381288140715).

<sup>12</sup> "Mental Health Basics," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 1, 2011, last modified October 4, 2013, accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/basics.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey W. Swanson and Allison G. Robertson, "Thinking Differently about Mental Illness, Violence Risk, and

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Gun Rights,” in *Updated Evidence and Policy Developments on Reducing Gun Violence in America*, *ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey W. Swanson and Allison G. Robertson, “Thinking Differently about Mental Illness, Violence Risk, and Gun Rights,” in *Updated Evidence and Policy Developments on Reducing Gun Violence in America*, *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> “Alcohol, Drugs, Mental Illness, and Gun Violence,” Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute, University of Washington, February 2013, accessed April 13, 2014, <http://adai.uw.edu/pubs/infobriefs/ADAI-IB-2013-01.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Sripal Bangalore, MD, and Franz H. Messerli, MD, “Gun Ownership and Firearm-related Deaths,” *American Journal of Medicine* 126 (2013): 873, accessed April 12, 2014, [http://www.amjmed.com/article/S0002-9343\(13\)00444-0/pdf](http://www.amjmed.com/article/S0002-9343(13)00444-0/pdf).

<sup>17</sup> “Where there are more guns there is more homicide,” Harvard Injury Control Research Center, citing Lisa Hepburn and David Hemenway, “Firearm availability and homicide: A review of the literature,” in *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 9 (2004):417-40, accessed April 13, 2014, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/hicrc/firearms-research/guns-and-death/>.

<sup>18</sup> Sripal Bangalore, MD, and Franz H. Messerli, MD, *ibid.*, 874.

<sup>19</sup> Sripal Bangalore, MD, and Franz H. Messerli, MD, *ibid.*, 875.

<sup>20</sup> “Gun ownership creates external psychic costs,” Harvard Injury Control Research Center, citing David Hemenway, Sara J. Solnick and Deborah R. Azrael, “Firearms and community feelings of safety,” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 86 (1995):121-132, accessed April 13, 2014, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/hicrc/firearms-research/policy/>.

<sup>21</sup> Garen J. Wintemute, “Broadening Denial Criteria,” in *Updated Evidence and Policy Developments on Reducing Gun Violence in America*, *ibid.*, 13-15.

<sup>22</sup> Garen J. Wintemute, *ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>23</sup> See Armslist website, accessed April 13, 2014, <http://www.armslist.com/>.