

## COMMENTARY

### **Free the Future**

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In the days following the horrific shootings in Newtown, CT, it is remarkable how the tragedy has consumed the nation and united us in vicarious grief. That twenty first graders and 6 educators, on a normal school day before the holidays, in what we think of as a sanctuary of childhood – their public school classrooms – could be killed in a hail of bullets shakes us to the core. Protecting and educating our children, sacrificing in the present to make sure their futures are bright, and finding joy in the innocence of childhood are fundamental American values. When these values are challenged and undercut, we as a nation tend to minimize our sometimes fractious differences and pull together in their defense.

The last time I recall this level of passion and unity was following the events of 9/11. In both cases, men hell-bent on killing innocent civilians, and themselves in the process, inflicted unimaginable pain and suffering on families and friends of those they killed. Although in both cases there were relatively few wounded survivors, the psychic wounds on citizens across the nation were profound. After 9/11, Americans rose up as one and committed the country to wars that continue today at a cumulative cost of 6,000 U.S. soldiers killed, more than 50,000 wounded, and over \$3.7 trillion expended. While the wisdom of the wars and the strategy employed can be debated, the national resolve and commitment after the attack were unquestionable.

A similar consuming discussion about what will be our national response to the Newtown tragedy appears to be underway, focused mainly on gun control and mental health issues.

My sense is that some reasonable gun control regulations will be enacted in response to the Newtown shootings, at least limiting the sale of assault rifles and large capacity magazines. Such reforms are long overdue, in my opinion, but they will have a modest impact at best on gun violence – largely due to the facts that a) the number of people killed by assault rifles compared to handguns is tiny and b) there are

over 300 million guns currently owned by Americans – making for relatively easy accessibility even if *all* gun sales were stopped.

As a child and adolescent psychiatrist, what makes more sense to me (and, coincidentally, to the gun rights advocates, who say “guns don’t kill people; *people* kill people”) is the impulse to apply our collective national will to fixing the mental health knowledge base and care system. Although the stigma of mental illness has diminished substantially in recent years, we have a long way to go before psychiatric disorders are treated like any other disease. Stigma keeps troubled people from seeking help, results in important psychiatric information not being as available to providers as medical information, allows discriminatory practices to continue within managed care, and makes mental health services the first to be cut when budgets are tight.

It would take only a fraction of the commitment that was made to the wars after 9/11 to dramatically improve mental health in the U.S. We could truly invest resources – not just lip service – in prevention and screening programs. We could address the dire shortage of mental health professionals that makes waiting lists in both clinics and private practices commonly range from three months to a full year. The cuts in states’ mental health budgets of nearly \$4 billion over the last three years that have decimated the social “safety net” of services could be restored. Through education provided to parents and teachers about the early signs of mental illness, appropriate steps in behavioral management and referral, the substantial progress that has been made in understanding normal and abnormal development in recent years could be effectively disseminated. And rather than slow down the research advances in the neurosciences – as is currently happening under steady NIH budget constriction– we could accelerate new discoveries and translational research.

I don’t mean to imply that an infusion of resources into mental health would guarantee that there would never be another mass shooting. While we know the risk factors associated with violent behavior, we are far from being able to exactly predict *who* among many troubled young men is likely to shoot someone, to say nothing of *when* this often impulsive act will occur. Some mental illnesses (schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, substance abuse) are associated with an increased in violent behavior but others (autism, Aspergers disorder) are not – and even the most intensive effort to improve mental health would take years to accomplish. Yet when only about 20% of children and youth with mental illness receive any kind of mental health services, the bar for improvement seems to be set pathetically

low. The American conscience, when affronted, and our national capacity, when fully harnessed, constitute an incredible force. A concerted war on mental illness would save lives, reduce suffering from the outset, and free the future for millions of affected individuals and their families.

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