



The Big Question: Can America ever be weaned off its love affair with guns?

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Why is US gun culture in the news?

This week's school shootings in Amish country, in which five children died, are just the latest in a seemingly never-ending string of spectacular mass murders to hit the headlines in the United States.

Last week, a gunman in the Colorado Rockies burst into a schoolroom and killed a student before turning his weapon on himself. Seven years ago, we had the bloodbath at Columbine High School. We've had disgruntled ex-employees shooting up their former workplaces, shootings in fast-food restaurants, and a parishioner in Fort Worth, Texas, shooting up his local church.

Each time it happens, a panoply of reasons comes to the fore. Gun-control activists blame the phenomenon largely, if not wholly, on easy access to firearms. Cultural conservatives like to blame Hollywood for its violent movies and video games. Other frequently identified causes are the prevalence of antidepressant prescriptions, the peculiar alienation of new white suburbs and the warp-effect of the media.

Is it about the guns?

There's no question that the gun culture - stemming back to the frontier spirit of the 19th century and justified, at least by gun-ownership advocates, by the Second Amendment of the Constitution - plays a major role in perpetuating the high numbers of violent deaths.

In the US, there are roughly 17,000 murders a year, of which about 15,000 are committed with firearms. By contrast, Britain, Australia and Canada combined see fewer than 350 gun-related murders each year. And it's not just about murder. The non-gun-related suicide rate in the US is consistent with the rest of the developed world. Factor in firearms, and the rate is suddenly twice as high as the rest of the developed world.

Children are affected particularly hard. An American youth is murdered with a firearm every four and a half hours on average. And an American youth commits suicide with a firearm every eight hours. It's worth remembering that many of the most spectacular mass murders of recent years were really suicides, with the perpetrators choosing to take a few other people with them while they were at it. Gun-control advocates argue they manage to carry out their murderous fantasies only because firearms give them the means to do so.

Why is gun control so ineffective?

Any adult with a clean criminal record can buy a gun in the US with relative ease. Gun shops and dealers will conduct mandatory background checks - introduced under the 1993 Brady bill, named after the White House Press Secretary James Brady, who was hit and disabled during an assassination attempt on President Reagan in 1981. But dealers at gun shows - popular throughout the heartland - are exempt from the federal law, making it easy for criminals or children to lay their hands on whatever they want. The semi-automatic TEC-9 machine pistols used by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold at Columbine were bought at a Colorado gun show.

Federal law, more generally, is subject to constant pressure from the National Rifle Association, the powerful gun-ownership lobby group, which has the influence to run elected officials out of office if they dare to challenge its agenda. That explains why a nationwide ban on semi-automatic assault weapons, introduced during the Clinton administration,