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Violence is Not a Virus, but it is Transmitted

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Violence is Not a Virus, but it is Transmitted

By Roberto Hugh Potter

UCF Forum columnist

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Recent mass shootings have again brought out the "violence is a disease" crowd. Their thinking is that if we reduce the availability of firearms, we will decrease violence.

That was a major belief system at the Division of Violence Prevention where I spent three of my 10 years working at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Ban the gun, and violence will decrease," is the thinking by some.

The gun is the problem, they say, and it has nothing to do with how we think about guns and violence. Not quite...

Growing up in Lake Placid, Fla., I was no stranger to guns. The nicest piece of furniture in many homes was often the gun cabinet in the living room. Few of these had locks on the cabinet or the guns.

When my classmates were old enough to drive to school, there were often rifles on the "Easy Rider Rifle Rack" - holds three, not two, of your favorite rifles and fishin' poles! - in the pickup truck. Few of these trucks, and probably none of the rifles, were locked. None of us would have ever thought to get one of those easily available guns to settle a score at school or afterwards.

These revelations used to shock my mostly northern, urban-raised colleagues at the CDC. I began working there shortly before the 1999 Columbine High School shootings. After that event, I posed the question to my colleagues: What had changed in the previous 30 years that allowed teenagers to even consider bringing a gun to school and using it? I got the usual responses about video games, popular media, political conservative radio, and so forth.

We also have a tendency to blame the technology of firearms and to jump to the mental illness explanation when the assailants are lone gunmen or a small group. There must be something aberrant about the shooter(s) to allow them to do such a horrible thing, observers say. Academics do functional MRI studies of their subjects' brains, hoping to find some difference between them and the rest of us. In at least one case, a researcher

has found his own fMRI remarkably similar to those of the imprisoned psychopaths he studied.

So, I return to my core question: What has changed that allows people to resort to using a firearm to settle a real or perceived score? In the science of criminogenics, we look for the factors that allow some of us to engage in criminal behavior. Yes, allow.

Most of us would never allow ourselves to engage in patterned criminal behaviors. We might violate an occasional criminal statute - such as a traffic regulation - but the reality is that most of us do not, and will not, engage in criminal violence. We may want to sometimes, but we don't.

In the sociological/criminological world we have a theory titled "differential association/learning." The basic idea is that we learn our criminal values and behaviors in intimate groups through the same process we learn our conventional values and behaviors. When there is more support from our important peers for thinking and acting in ways that violate the criminal law, we are more likely to do so.

The role of gangs and duos in much of the violence we have observed in the past decade provides a great deal of support for this learning approach. They receive more support for using violence, including but not limited to firearms.

Predicting the rare "lone wolf" who employs automatic-firearm technology and explosive devices to harm others is probably impossible. After all, the man charged in the recent Aurora, Colo., theatre shootings was in a setting surrounded by mental health, medical, and public-health professionals.

The so-called public-health approach to violence treats the outcome as more dependent on the technology of guns than it does on the thinking patterns and values of those who engage in such violence.

Violence is not a virus, but it is transmitted.

It is transmitted through the learning process in homes, gangs, and other social groups. Even using the "disease metaphor" in relation to violence diverts our attention from the fundamental fact that there are segments of our population who believe that guns are the solution to problems. They associate with others who think like they do, and reinforce each other and new initiates into those groups.

Unfortunately, in some families, the use of violence is an acceptable value. It is these beliefs, not a virus, that allow people to use violence to solve problems, regardless of the technology. After all, people also have been beaten to death with boards, not just shot to death.

Our real task is to assess why those who turn to patterned use of violence do so in the first place. What has changed since I left Lake Placid that allows greater use of violence among young people, and specifically the use of guns in that violence? Has the level of

violence actually gotten worse? My former CDC colleagues were distressed when I would point out that we live in one of the least violent periods of American history. It simply did not fit their view of the world.

In the end, most of us do not need a firearm. The wisdom of the Lynyrd Skynyrd song "Saturday Night Special" fits here:

"So why don't we dump 'em people

To the bottom of the sea

Before some fool come around here

Wanna shoot either you or me?"

Then, let's figure out why things have changed to the point that some people in our society feel that using guns to settle scores or solve problems is an acceptable choice. Banning technologies to solve errors in thinking may reduce certain outcomes, but it will not solve the original problem.

That problem is us.

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