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The Weapons and Violence Conundrum: Let's Approach the Problem with Facts

by [James Swan](#) on January 7, 2013

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Young plain-clothes Swiss citizens carry their rifles openly and without worry. Such a sight outside of a secluded range would quickly draw attention in the United States, but is a day-to-day occurrence in a country like Switzerland.

In response to the recent tragic rampage shooting in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, people all across the country are voicing their reactions, which is good. Unfortunately a lot of the media are exploiting the tragedy, using sensationalism to boost ratings rather than facts. As many of you are hunters and target shooters, you may well get drawn into this heated controversy and become targets simply because you are the most visible people with firearms. I hope this column will provide some arrows for your quiver.

I wear several hats. Today I am wearing my psychologist hat. My Ph.D. is in psychology from the University of Michigan and since 1970 I've taught psychology at several major universities, practiced as a therapist for a decade, been an expert witness in court cases, and consulted with a number of local, state, and federal agencies including law enforcement. Currently I'm a research adjunct faculty member at [Sofia University](#) where I help train clinical psychologists. As you might guess I am also a firearms owner and user, like 80% of my neighbors.

Let's go over some facts and data relative to shootings, guns, and society in general.

Rampage shootings are not spur of the moment

[As Texas A&M Professor Christopher Ferguson has pointed out,](#)

For all the disbelief and dismay, we actually know pretty well that most such events are committed by individuals with a particular set of characteristics. School shooters have

generally been found to 1) have a history of antisocial-personality traits, 2) suffer from mental illnesses such as depression or psychosis and 3) tend to obsess about how others, whether other individuals or society at large, have wronged them.

Rampage shooters are also often captivated by the idea that they will become posthumously famous, according to criminologist [Dr. Adam Lankford](#). A fifth factor driving many school shooters is that they are the [victims of bullying](#).

At almost the same time as the Sandy Hook school shooting, [in China a man entered an elementary school with a knife and wounded 22 children](#). This simply points out that guns are weapons of convenience. If a person wants to do damage to himself or others, they will try to find a way to do it. Box cutters took down the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 9/11.

Misconceptions about mental health

About 25% of the population in the United States suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year, yet most people with mental disorders aren't in treatment. We have to teach people to understand that having gone through some kind of mental health treatment does not brand them as inferior for life.

Some news reports have suggested autism and/or Aspergers as a cause for Adam Lanza's behavior. These are neurological conditions with [little or no research to support any connection between autism and Asperger's and violence](#). Where such conditions could have a relation to violence is associated with how people treat people with autism and Asperger's.

Diagnosis and treatment of mental health problems is not as easy as giving someone as aspirin for a headache. [I was once asked by the Seattle King County Criminal Justice System to interview a man in jail](#). He had a master's degree and had been an oceanographer, but was homeless and had been breaking into buildings to sleep instead of going to shelters. Why was he breaking into buildings? I asked. Because he heard "voices" telling him to kill the president and he did not want to do this, and he could not get help from the mental health system, he said. Upon questioning him, it turned out that he was a victim of a botched operation to cure his epilepsy and the "president" was actually his image of the doctor who had treated him.

Part of the problem with mental health services dates back to the 1960s and the [Great Society Program](#), which gave us Medicare and Medicaid, and was also supposed to close down many of the large asylums and build community mental health centers. At the University of Oregon in the 1970s, I trained hundreds of people to work in those centers. The asylums were closed, but the community mental health centers that were promised were never built. [Government funding for mental health services has only gotten worse in recent years](#).

Today one of the most pressing mental health problems is the inability of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (commonly called the VA) to [provide effective treatment for military men and women suffering from PTSD](#). The consequences of this failure include the soaring rate of suicides (which now exceed combat deaths), homicides, and domestic violence among our troops.

The failure of schools to offer emotional education

Our schools largely avoid emotional education that could help people develop skills to help people with interpersonal, work, and school situations. Instead, people are taught to avoid their feelings. Learning how to give and ask for help is a survival skill, especially if bullying is involved. Daniel Goleman has written a most important book on this subject, [Emotional Intelligence](#).

Flaws in the background check system

[A recent article in the New York Times](#) details how the FBI's background checks system for criminal activity, domestic violence, and involuntary commitment is not working. As many as a million people who should be on the list are not. This could not have stopped all rampage killings, but it could have prevented the Virginia Tech mass murder in 2007. A state judge had declared the gunman mentally ill, but the record of that proceeding was not submitted to the FBI so the shooter was able to pass a background check and buy the weapons to go on a killing spree.



Targets from a competition in Switzerland are carried openly through the streets, along with their attendant rifles.

Hoplophobia

[Hoplophobia](#), the morbid fear of weapons, fuels a lot of the controversy about guns, and inflammatory media adds to the problem.

A weapon is a tool that amplifies human nature. Mastering the instinctual energies that move us to use weapons is part of psychological maturity. Note how popular the [National Archery in the Schools Program](#) has become. Kids love it. Has this resulted in kids shooting each other? No.

I support teaching martial arts as part of the physical education program. There is [considerable scientific support of martial arts training being good for mind, body and spirit](#). Martial arts training also helps reduce fears of weapons.

It's essential to prevent people with serious mental illness and/or a criminal history from possessing guns, but the reality is, if people were educated to respect weapons, not fear them, the ownership and use of weapons might be dealt with very differently. Attorney and author

Stephen Halbrook has done [considerable research on firearms in Switzerland, whose firearms laws had a strong influence on the creation of the Second Amendment](#) (link to pdf file).

Shooting is the national sport of Switzerland. Halbrook reports that,

Once every five years is the Eidgenössisches Schützenfest or Tir federal—the federal shooting festival. In 2000, some 56,000 shooters fired 3.5 million cartridges over a three-week period. (By comparison, the National Matches in the United States attract only 2,000-3,000 competitors.) While every Swiss village has a shooting range (at least 3,000 for the whole country), few have a golf course.

Where do the guns come from?

Since the founding of the Swiss Confederation in 1291, every man has been required to be armed and to serve in the militia army. Today, every male when he turns 20 is issued a Sturmgewehr 90 military rifle and required to keep it at home. When one is no longer required to serve—typically at age 42—he may keep his rifle (converted from automatic to semi-automatic) or pistol (in the case of an officer or specialized unit).

People are free to come and go to shooting competitions throughout the country, and competitors are commonly seen with firearms on trains, buses, bicycles, and on foot. Assault rifles are hung on hat racks in restaurants and are carried on the shoulder on the sidewalk. Rifles are often just carried without cases. The militia soldier has always been required to keep at home a minimum supply of ammunition, issued by the military, in event of a mobilization or foreign attack.

For quality of life, Zurich, which hosts an annual shooting competition that may draw over 5,000 contestants, rates as the best city in the world. Despite the abundance of firearms, typically knives and strangling are responsible for more homicides, [which are considerably lower per capita than the US](#). Because the Swiss people are universally armed, they enjoy a low crime rate and avoided being pulled into the two World Wars, saving untold numbers of lives in the twentieth century alone.

Conclusion

Gun control laws are most often passed immediately following tragic events. When Canada launched its long guns registry in 1993, following a rampage shooting, it was supposed to reduce crime. Despite political promises that the program would not cost over \$2 million a year, by 2011 the annual cost was over \$66 million a year. By 2012, the registry cost had ballooned to \$2.7 billion. In March of 2012, the registry was scrapped. And what did the registry accomplish?

[According to Simon Fraser University Professor Gary Mauser](#), “To this day, there is no convincing evidence that registering firearms has been effective in reducing either homicide rates overall, or spousal murders in particular. It is knives, not long guns, that are the weapons used most often to kill women.” Mauser also finds that “The evidence shows that the long-gun registry has not been effective in reducing criminal violence. Nor is the Canadian experience unique. No international study of firearm laws by criminologists or

economists has found support for the claim that restricting access to firearms by civilians (in general) reduces criminal violence.”

An ounce of useful prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Photos of Switzerland are by Stephen Halbrook and are seen in the documentary video, [A Question of Balance](#).