

I am saddened by the tragic events in Newtown, Connecticut, but I believe that efforts to impose new restrictions on lawful and responsible owners are misguided.

Your focus should be on strengthening mental health care and improving the quality of data supporting NICs checks (National Instant Criminal Background Check System). Do NOT pass more gun laws; instead, work to enforce the more than 20,000 gun laws already on the books.

So how do you keep the Adam Lanzas and James Holmes types (the Joker of Aurora, CO) at home and away from the Mall theaters and the schools? Not by taking away weapons from Americans who are armed to protect themselves from these suburban unsupervised psychos and other thugs on the street. You do it early on and in school.

Schools are the most important social institutions in our society. Social clubs and churches, also play important roles in socializing us, but public schools accept all children, regardless of background or need. Human beings are inherently social beings. People need people to survive. We need contact with others to sustain ourselves and to remind us of what it means to be human. Our schools need to teach our children how to be productive and inclusive members of society. Schools play a vital role in a society as diverse and complex as ours where socialization and learning can take place safely. Its important to stop bullying and ostracizing in our schools and to identify individuals who do have issues early on in life. Teachers should have the rights to view student medical records, not only to protect themselves but their students as well. Did I mention I taught in CT for over 25 years?

When our schools are attacked and when the safety of children are at risk everyone is affected. It is devastating to think that the social trust, that is essential for learning to take place, has been broken. Some may react to these shootings by calling for more security and by banning weapons. Others may feel safer by homeschooling their children in the hopes that this will shield them from harm. The answer will not be found in either strategy. Instead, we must find ways to strengthen our bonds, to increase our connections to each other, to embrace the disaffected and to care for the mentally ill. We again must turn to our schools to seek ways to restore and revitalize the bonds that protect us and hold us together as a community and a family.

National Instant Criminal Background Check System is an existing law that has been underfunded and insufficiently implemented. Updated after the Virginia Tech shootings, backed by the NRA and signed into law by then President Bush, the law requires federally licensed gun dealers to check with a coordinated federal database to see whether the would-be gun buyer has any history of dangerous mental health problems -- as well as criminal record, arrest warrants, or orders of civil protection -- that would stop them from owning a firearm under existing law.

Since Virginia Tech, states have made only limited progress in reporting the critical mental health information, primarily because Congress has failed to provide the necessary funding, granting just 5.3% of the total authorized amount during the Obama years.

Project Exile, a pilot program first implemented in Richmond, Virginia, which prosecuted serious local gun crimes committed by felons under federal law, putting repeat offenders in federal prisons far away from their communities. Project Safe Neighborhoods, ended up cutting the "gun carry" rate in half and reducing the murder rate in Richmond by more than 60%. The five-year mandatory sentence for committing a crime with an illegal gun changed criminal behavior. Similar initiatives have been implemented in cities throughout the country, but the coordination has been spotty and the Obama administration has failed to follow through on the model or add innovations to it.

The Justice Department could increase the prosecutions of people who falsify information on their gun background checks. In 2009, the FBI reported 71,000 instances of people lying on their background checks to buy guns. But the Justice Department prosecuted just 77 cases -- that's about

1/10th of 1%. A lack of follow through from the federal government is letting these gun criminals walk, and that sends a message about lack of enforcement. Another could be common sense measures like barring individuals on the FBI terrorist watch list from buying and owning weapons.

Most NRA members do support requiring background checks on gun retail employees, 74% would support background checks on all potential gun buyers and 64% support requiring gun owners to report lost or stolen firearms.

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