

### Letter to the Editor—Guns and Homicides in the United States

Sir,

On June 26, 2008, in a 5–4 vote Thursday, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that the Second Amendment to the Constitution guarantees the right of individual Americans to keep and bear arms. President George W. Bush said in response to this ruling.

As a longstanding advocate of the rights of gun owners in America, I applaud the Supreme Court's historic decision today confirming what has always been clear in the Constitution: the Second Amendment protects an individual right to keep and bear firearms.

For me, as a physician, gun ownership is a public health issue. I want to know what the consequences of gun ownership are. I feel qualified to answer this question since I have examined hundreds of homicide perpetrators in the last 57 years.

There is common misconception that the majority of homicides are carried out by criminals. In reality, most homicides in the United States are the result of an ambivalent relationship between the killer and the victim. Only hit men and robbers kill without having a relationship with the victim. A sudden increase in aggressive level in a relationship may result in an altered state of consciousness, popularly known as “rage.” Because handguns kill quickly, they are decisive in the impulsive homicides.

The proximity of a handgun becomes the cause of a lethal outcome. Without a gun, an episode of rage is rarely deadly. One hundred thousand Americans are injured or killed with guns each year (*New York Times* Editorial January 12, 2011).

Some homicides are committed by psychotics; the rampage in Tucson, AZ is a case in point. The gunman was known to be

psychotic and dangerous; however, the practical abolition of civil commitment made it unlikely that he could be hospitalized before he proved his psychosis by mass killing. In his forthcoming trial, insanity will be most likely asserted as a defense. As usual, it will not prevail, and he will be convicted of few first-degree murders; the rest of his life will be spent in the so-called correctional system. Since the 1980s, prisons have become the default institutions for the state hospital system.

The many hundreds of impulsive homicides I have evaluated should have been charged with manslaughter, a crime punished usually with an imprisonment of less than 10 years. However, in all the cases in which I have been involved, the perpetrators were charged with first-degree murder. Elected prosecutors get more publicity in a first-degree murder trial than a guilty plea to manslaughter.

It costs \$35,000 to \$40,000 per year to keep an inmate in a prison. The hope that a gun offers protection is a socially expensive proposition. In all the years of my study of homicide, I do not recall a case where a citizen protected himself or herself from a criminal assault by having a gun. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords said last year in an interview with the *New York Times*, “I have a Glock 9 millimeter and I’m a pretty good shot” (*NYT* January 9, 2011).

Homicide rate and the number of guns in a given community are directly proportional. When policemen and criminals will be the only people who have guns, the homicide rate will drop.

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