

By Polly Poskin, ICASA Executive Director

I recently had a terrible thought about guns and death: Perhaps, if lawmakers in Congress rather than children in schools were the victims of gunfire, gun control might take on a whole new meaning. Maybe then, the horror of death by gunfire would become real to lawmakers. I believe no one should die by gunfire. No one. And I am trying to wrap my mind around the fact that, once again, children in schools were cut down by bullets from guns manufactured to kill *people*.

On March 7 in Williamsport, Pennsylvania at a small Roman Catholic Junior-Senior High School, a female freshman fired bullets around the school cafeteria. One bullet ricocheted into the shoulder of Kimberly Marchese, a 13 year-old schoolmate. Thanks to the heroics of a 14 year-old boy, the suspect dropped her 22-caliber revolver, saving lives and preventing further injuries. She is charged with attempted homicide and aggravated assault. A 13 year-old shooter. A firearm belonging to an adult. A 14 year-old stepping in the line of fire to save his classmates. How much does it take to heat up the debate about firearms?

Where was the debate two days earlier when Charles Andrew Williams, 15, used a 22-caliber, long-barreled revolver to kill schoolmates Randy Gordon and Bryan Zuckor and injure 13 others at Santana High School in Santee, California? All of this comes two years after the carnage at Columbine High School. Which came two years after killings by gunfire in other U.S. junior and senior high schools.

I once believed we could count on Congress to create gun control measures in order to stop the killing of youth in our schools. I still believe we have to change what schools teach and what they tolerate in students' behavior. Time and again, the shooters had been targeted relentlessly with taunts and put downs by their classmates. Time and again, the

victims of bullying and harassment picked up firearms to take revenge. It's a vicious, deadly cycle that must end. The anguish youth inflict on one another must come to an end.

And I now believe the elimination of handguns – perhaps private possession of all firearms – must be an integral part of the strategy to restore an environment of tolerance, respect and safety for youth. Firearms produce tragic, heinous and deadly endings. They are used with the intent to kill and they are used to force submission. And, as the facts show, gun violence is not limited to schools.

- The majority of fatal accidents involving a firearm occur in the home.
- Gunshot wounds are the single most common cause of death for women in the home, accounting for nearly half of all homicides and 42 percent of suicides.
- Weapons (mostly handguns) were used by rapists in 4,455 reported rapes in 1999.
- More teenage boys in America die from gunfire than from car accidents.
- Gunshot wounds are now the leading cause of death for teenage boys in America (white, African-American, urban, suburban).
- An adolescent is twice as likely to commit suicide if a gun is kept in the home.
- Everyday, about seventy-five American children are shot; most recover – fifteen do not.
- From 1980 to 1997, gun killings by young people 18 to 24 increased from about 5,000 to more than 7,500.

- Data published by Krug et al in 1998 indicated the following rates for guns death per 100,000 population :

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USA	14.24
Switzerland	5.31
Scotland	0.54
England & Wales	0.41
Japan	0.05

Whose choices are we valuing when we say guns must be available in our free market? Whose safety are we prioritizing when we fail to grapple with the issue of gun control – when we fail to remedy a deadly problem? Who are we protecting with our silence, our inertia. Congress must act.

But there is no action. The debate about how to eliminate (at best) or control (at least) guns has been silenced in Congress. That silence is a tragedy waiting to happen. Actually it's not waiting – it unfolds on CNN with each new shooting. And all of us cringe and wait for a solution while Congress follows the National Rifle Association's lead for management in the United States. Despite the fact that the majority of Americans favor some form of gun control, Congress freezes in the presence of the NRA and an administration that is soft on handgun control and silent on handgun elimination. Until control is wrested away from the NRA, our children – all of us – remain at risk of random gun violence.

It is time for the U.S. Congress to raise the debate about gun control to a new level in this country. We cannot afford to sacrifice our children or ourselves for ready access to handguns. Congress must wake-up to the bloody handwriting on the wall before it is too late for them, our children and all of us. Closing our eyes, hoping for a magic cure, ignoring the body count – none of these strategies are working.

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Ken Ritter, "Community Mourns Victim of California School Shooting," State Journal Register, Springfield, IL, March 11, 2001, page 6.

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