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How Can We Stop Mass Shootings in Our Communities?

The tragic attack at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, has raised concerns among many people across the nation. Other violent episodes, such as the killing of a teenager who was gunned down after returning home from the president’s inauguration, have also drawn attention. While mass shootings are infrequent, they may be increasing. Each has devastating effects on a whole community.

Overall, the United States has become safer in recent years. Yet mass shooters target innocent people indiscriminately, often in locales where people ordinarily (and rightly) feel safe—movie theaters, college campuses, schools.

How can we stop such violent acts and ensure that people feel safe in their homes and communities?

This issue advisory presents three options for deliberation, along with their drawbacks.

Option One: Reduce the Threat of Mass Shootings

Option	Actions	Drawbacks
<p>The problem is that we are too vulnerable to violence. Communities and homes should be places where people are safe. The means for carrying out mass shootings are all around, and those who might perpetrate them are free among us. It is too easy for individuals to obtain weapons that are designed to kill a large number of victims in a short time.</p> <p>We cannot stop all violent impulses, but we can and should make it much more difficult for people to act on them. We need to restrict the availability of dangerous weapons, identify potentially dangerous people, and prevent them from carrying out their plans.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restrict assault weapons, high-capacity magazines, and armor-piercing ammunition. Make involuntary commitment to mental health facilities easier to achieve and reopen closed mental institutions. Require citizens to show cause for concealed carry permits. Require that citizens keep firearms outside of the home in secure places, such as gun ranges. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stable, law-abiding citizens will lose some of their rights under the Second Amendment. Some people may be unnecessarily institutionalized; surrounding communities will have to tolerate living with these institutions. This might limit people’s ability to defend themselves as it is hard to anticipate threats that warrant self-defense. This will make it impossible to use a weapon in self-defense against animals or other individuals.
<p>A Primary Drawback: We would give the government extraordinary control over cherished freedoms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require a mandatory 28-day wait to purchase firearms and background checks for all, including purchases from private individuals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This will delay people’s ability to defend themselves. Background checks may weed out criminals but miss mentally ill individuals.

Option Two: Equip People to Defend Themselves

Option	Actions	Drawbacks
<p>The problem is that most people, especially children, are not able to defend themselves from sudden danger due to violence.</p> <p>There will always be some who are a threat to those around them. In such situations, we cannot afford to rely on someone else to rescue us. We need to be prepared for violence and have the means to defend against it. The Second Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees this right.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post more guards and security officers in schools and other public places. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ This may interfere with the learning environment and make schools and other public places seem like prison camps.
<p>A Primary Drawback:</p> <p>The proliferation of firearms and armed guards in public places would create the atmosphere of a police state and would significantly change US society.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require all jurisdictions to allow law-abiding citizens to carry concealed firearms and greatly expand training for self-defense. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ The guns that people see as a means of self-defense would sometimes be used against them by others.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drill teachers and students in the best ways to hide and protect themselves in the case of attack. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ This will alarm young children and may cause them to become unnecessarily fearful.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arm teachers and school administrators so they can protect themselves and their students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ This places teachers in a position for which they may neither be ready nor temperamentally suited. Guns in schools may go off accidentally.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals, especially teachers and professors, should be vigilant and identify others who appear to be unbalanced or to pose potential threats. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ This could turn people against one another and create a culture of informants. It may result in young people being pushed into the mental health system when they are just undergoing the normal stresses of adolescence.

This issue advisory was prepared for the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation. National Issues Forums issue guides are used by civic and educational organizations interested in addressing public issues. These organizations use the books in locally initiated forums convened each year in hundreds of communities. Recent topics have included higher education, the national debt, health care, energy, and Social Security. For more information on the National Issues Forums, visit the website: www.nifi.org.

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Option Three: Root Out Violence in Society

Option	Actions	Drawbacks
<p>The problem is that we live in a culture that perpetuates violence and numbs people to its effects. Violence and criminality are pervasive in popular music, films, television, video games, and sports. Mass murderers gain notoriety through nonstop media portrayals.</p> <p>This results in a culture in which stories of mass shootings circulate and gain momentum—so further shootings become a greater possibility. We need to root out and stop the glorification of violence to break this cycle.</p> <p>Primary Drawback: This would change our culture in significant ways, in many cases limiting what we can appropriately say and do.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News media should reduce coverage of mass shootings so such killers are not guaranteed fame and notoriety. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ This will limit the spread of important news and, in some cases, may put people at greater risk due to lack of knowledge.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realign all social services around violence prevention—including youth development, mental health, anti-gang, and anti-drug programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ This will not reach people who are not in the system, some of whom are dangerous.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restrict depictions of violence, mayhem, and shooting in video games and other mass media, such as primetime television. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ This limits artists’ freedom of expression. Furthermore, there is no conclusive research linking entertainment violence and behavior.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crack down on, and eliminate, all bullying in schools and workplaces. Teach peaceful conflict resolution to all young people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ This may not target the people who could need it most—that is, loners who do not attend school or have regular jobs.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents can restrict the amount and type of television and computer use their children have access to. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ In a culture where most people enjoy violent entertainment, such children may be ostracized.



Founded in 1927, the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio, (with offices in Washington, DC, and New York City) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute that studies the public’s role in democracy. It has provided issue guides and other research for the National Issues Forums.

For information about the Kettering Foundation, please visit www.kettering.org or contact the foundation at 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799. Phone: 1-800-221-3657.

About This Issue Advisory

The horrific events in Newtown, Connecticut, and elsewhere have touched a deep chord in many of us. Deliberative forums on this issue will not be easy. It will be important to remind participants that the objective of these forums is to begin to work through the tensions between security, freedom, and a healthy society.

Mass violence evokes raw emotions. Participants in this forum may become angry, and those with strong feelings may feel attacked by those who hold other points of view. This may sidetrack the deliberation. In productive deliberation, people examine the advantages and disadvantages of different options for addressing a difficult public problem, weighing these against the things they hold deeply valuable. This framing is designed to help people work through their emotions to recognize the trade-offs that each of us must wrestle with in deciding how to move forward.

The framework outlined in this issue advisory encompasses several options and provides an alternative means of moving forward in order to avoid the polarizing rhetoric now growing around the major policy options. Each option is rooted in a shared concern and proposes a distinct strategy for addressing the problem that includes roles for citizens to play. Equally impor-

tant, each option presents the drawbacks inherent in each action. Recognizing these drawbacks allows people to see the trade-offs that they must consider in pursuing any action. It is these drawbacks, in large part, that make coming to shared judgment so difficult—but ultimately, so productive.

One effective way to begin deliberative forums on this issue is to ask people to describe how the issue of mass violence has affected them or their families. Some will have had direct experience; many more will say they are affected by the fear of such acts. They are likely to mention the concerns identified in the framework.

The goal of this framework is to assist people in moving from initial reactions to more reflective judgment. That requires serious deliberation or weighing options for action against the things people value.