

Crisis Connection

Virginia Tech, dating violence & guns

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I don't know about you, but my first reaction to the horrible massacre at Virginia Tech was not, unlike President Bush and other politicians, an affirmation of the right to bear arms! Especially now that we are learning that intimate partner violence may have set off the rampage, it is the absolute opposite. We have just got to get serious about enforcing prohibitions against abusers having firearms. We have to educate judges, police officers on and off campus, and victims themselves that firearms and domestic violence are too dangerous to mix.

The research is clear. If an abusive man just *owns* a gun, whether or not he ever used it to threaten or injure his victim, there is a five-fold increase in the chances that the abuser will kill his partner. If he actually used the gun in a prior incident, the chances increase twelve-fold. To prevent lethal violence, firearms must be removed from abusive men as soon as possible.

Federal laws prohibiting convicted or court-restrained abusers from possessing firearms are a good start.

Tragically, without equivalent state firearm prohibitions, little attention is paid to enforcing the federal prohibitions. Most state laws are inadequate, including those in Virginia. Only California, for example, requires state and local judges to inform subjects of protective orders that they may not possess a firearm. Only California and New York actually require that courts receive notice that prohibited firearms have actually been removed as ordered after issuance of a court order.

Enforcement in federal courts is pretty lame too. If I were in charge of evaluating U.S. attorneys, I would look to see if they were enforcing federal abuser firearm prohibitions first and worry about less lethal issues later, if at all. We know from the outstanding work of a few U.S. attorneys in Utah, Maine and West Virginia that rigorous federal enforcement is possible. The key is the U.S. Attorney reaching out to local law enforcement and correctional agencies, especially probation and parole officers, to identify prohibited abusers and then prosecute them.

While we are waiting for these laws to be enforced, what can we do to safeguard young women in college? I know that I will be telling my daughter when she goes to college in another year to be wary of going out with anyone who owns or acquires a firearm. Despite myths to the contrary, gun ownership is not the norm. There are plenty of fine young men out there who don't own firearms: stick with them. As a former probation officer, I can vouch for research that documents the opposite, too. **Persons on probation for criminal offenses are disproportionately more likely to possess firearms.** This, of course, doesn't mean that all men own firearms are on probation. It just means: please approach with caution.

There is another lesson here, too. Dating and intimate partner violence extends beyond immediate partners and their children. It represents a threat to everyone. Apparently officials did not lock down the Virginia Tech campus right away because the initial homicides were believed to be tied to a "domestic dispute," according to early media reports, and were therefore contained. Remember the adult sniper who terrorized the DC area with his younger charge a few years ago, randomly killing innocent people? He began with domestic violence in the state of Washington.

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