

We are Newtown

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—The horror at Sandy Hook Elementary could have happened in Highland County, Va., where I live.

Our county-wide, K-12 system has about 230 kids in one facility. It's a five-minute drive from the sheriff's office.

Over the last 30 years, I've seen one or two student outcasts who might have been warped in the same way as Adam Lanza, the 20-year-old with the toadstool haircut, who murdered 27 people last Friday. We, too, have had teenagers who were forced to deal with depression, mental illness or dreadful parenting.

It could have happened here, or anywhere. It could have happened to my kid, or yours.

Our elementary building would have presented less of an entry obstacle than the one in Connecticut. Once the shooter was inside, our students and faculty would have had no more chance than the 26 at Sandy Hook.

Most homes here have guns, including mine. We've had only a few instances where a gun was used in an attack, and almost always that was in a domestic dispute.

It's common for drivers of pickup trucks to position a scoped hunting rifle on the passenger side, with its muzzle in the floor well and its stock resting on the seat. These rifles are not semiautomatics. To chamber each round for firing, you have to work a lever or a bolt. I've never felt that these rifles were a threat to me or the community.

Some homes contain semiautomatic, civilian-versions of the military's M-16 rifle like the Bushmaster XM-15 that Lanza used. This type of AR-15 (assault rifle) is legal to own in both Connecticut and Virginia—and most other places. It is easy to buy legally, and even easier to buy illegally. Depending on the model, a new one goes for \$750 to \$1,100.

The Bushmaster uses a 30-round magazine. The rifle fires quickly, as many as 45 rounds per minute, with little recoil. It can be adapted to launch grenades.

The .223 cartridge that Lanza fired is designed to kill people. It fragments on impact with flesh and bone. Neither the rifle nor the ammunition is intended for hunting game.

Nancy Lanza, who Adam shot four times in the face before he went to the school, bought the Bushmaster legally. She passed the background screen. She was not a criminal. She had no history of mental illness. She may or may not have kept her guns in a locked safe. But she did fail to keep her son, whom she knew to be troubled, separated from them.

People get assault-type rifles for home defense, Doomsday, a war of self-defense against the federal government and playing around. Those are the foundations, as I understand them, for having a laissez-faire interpretation of the Second Amendment that would allow private ownership of any weapon.

Complete security is an unachievable objective. A school can never be made into an impregnable fortress. There's no perfect defense against a Lanza with a Bushmaster and a dozen loaded clips.

We could harden our own small school, but it would always be vulnerable.

Our other public squares are even less secure.

Our 1940s courthouse has no safety checks at all. You can, if you are so inclined, walk into our one courtroom with a Bushmaster concealed in a gym bag, take it out and kill or wound 10 or 15 individuals easy. The county prosecutor, my wife, is a likely first target.

For that matter, you could walk into our library, medical center, basketball games, restaurants, farm store, churches, banks, telephone coop, inn, businesses and our sheriff's office and start blasting away.

Some vulnerability of this sort is just part of modern life. But another portion of it need not be.

School mayhem -- mostly shootings -- seem to have started (or at least, started to be recorded) in the mid-19th Century. Several hundred instances have been reported since then, involving hundreds of deaths and injuries.

The most deadly of these massacres occurred in Bath, Mich., in 1927 when Andrew Kehoe, a disaffected farmer and school-board treasurer, dynamited a school, killing 44 and injuring 58, mostly elementary school children.

The most intriguing shooting took place in Austin, Tx., in 1978 when the 13-year-old son of George Christian, former White House press secretary to Lyndon Johnson, gunned down his English teacher with three shots from his father's .22 rifle in front of 30 classmates. It appears that his politically prominent Dad pulled strings so that John Daniel Christian was never prosecuted. He did, however, spend almost two years in a private psychiatric

hospital in Dallas. He is now a licensed lawyer with the Ryan Law Firm in Austin where he has a tax practice.

School shootings seem to be increasing in frequency and body count. When a shooter wants to kill as many as possible, he uses a semiautomatic rifle, which became available in the late 1980s. The first use of an assault rifle at a school occurred in Stockton, Ca., where more than 100 shots from an AK-47 killed five and wounded 30 in 1989.

Can we put an armed guard at every school door in our country? We could if we were willing to pay for it. If each of America's 99,000 public schools had one armed guard at a current total cost per guard of, say, \$60,000 a year for wages, benefits, equipment and training, the annual bill would be \$5.94 billion.

One armed guard at \$60,000 could have prevented the slaughter at Sandy Hook.

More than 23,000 public schools now have guards--some armed (Baltimore, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles); some not (New York, Boston). It's not clear to me how an unarmed guard could have prevented Adam Lanza from pulling the Bushmaster's trigger dozens of times.

Schools that don't have an armed guard have no defense -- absolutely none -- against a Lanza-type assault that breaches locked doors.

It's easy to understand why gun-control advocates want to limit and regulate new sales of semiautomatic weapons, big clips and anti-personnel ammunition. With millions of these guns out there, nothing short of compensated confiscation would disarm that part of the public that would be willing to be disarmed. Criminals, Adam Lanzas, Doomsday preppers and Second Amendment advocates would hide their guns.

Confiscation is not in the cards, and our experience with prohibiting alcohol and drugs suggests that banning what people want simply creates criminal supply networks and black markets.

Inevitably, and regardless of strict gun controls, a few people every year will get into schools and start shooting. What defense do six-year-olds have against a guy shooting 45 bullets a minute at them? Throwing crayons?

The smaller they are, the harder their fall.

When a shooter starts shooting, all of the prevention systems have failed. Something more is needed than waiting to be assassinated.

Gun advocates argue that volunteers from school staffs should be trained and equipped with weapons to defend against shooter attacks. A scheme like this will undoubtedly produce accidents. Standing alone, this is a cheap fix. Paid, armed guards are a safer alternative. Retired military and retired law-enforcement officers are obvious candidates.

Guns in schools -- trained volunteer staff -- is the last option for defense. It is a bad choice in many ways, but it might deter school shooters from attacking. If it deters, if a shooter doesn't appear, then guns-in-schools has succeeded.

I think we will see some small rural school systems try it in lieu of paid guards. Perhaps others will try it in conjunction with such guards. It's a dangerous solution in my opinion, but I understand why it will be tried.

I don't think tighter restrictions over semiautomatics, high-capacity magazines and anti-personnel ammunition is incompatible with or contradicts the idea of having an armed guard in a public school.

A good chance exists that a legislative package will come out of Washington that addresses guns, mental-health services, intervention options for parents of troubled kids, school safety and, perhaps, something that scales down the media assault on civic safety.

While the First Amendment protects the production of the video game, "School Shooter: North American Video Tour 2012," nothing compels stores or Amazon to sell it. Or perhaps, content such as this, should be subject to a tax that discourages consumption. To the extent that our society can shun this dangerous junk in the way we have stigmatized cigarettes and drunk driving, we might reduce its impact on vulnerable teenagers.

I hope to see thousands of first-graders on Capitol Hill when Congress is considering this legislation: **Children Against School Shootings.**

I hope each one wears a photograph of one of the 20 Sandy Hook kids and a name tag:

I am Charlotte Bacon, 6
I am Daniel Barden, 7
I am Olivia Engel, 6
I am Josephine Gay, 7
I am Ana Marquez-Greene, 6
I am Dylan Hockley, 6
I am Madeline Hsu, 6
I am Catherine Hubbard, 6
I am Chase Kowalski, 7
I am Jesse Lewis, 6
I am James Mattioli, 6
I am Grace McDonnell, 7
I am Emilie Parker, 6
I am Jack Pinto, 6

I am Noah Pozner, 6
I am Caroline Previdi, 6
I am Jessica Rekos, 6
I am Avielle Richman, 6
I am Benjamin Wheeler, 6
I am Allison N. Wyatt, 6

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