

3Qs: After tragedy in Newtown, what's next?

December 19 2012, by Matt Collette



We asked experts in law, psychology, and criminology to examine last Friday's Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Connecticut that claimed the lives of 20 children and seven adults. Credit: Howard Simmons/NY Daily News via Getty Images

The grieving community of Newtown, Conn., is taking its first steps toward recovery following a deadly shooting rampage at Sandy Hook Elementary School last Friday. In a speech Sunday evening, President Obama consoled the families of Newtown and promised to use the powers of his office to take action, saying, "These tragedies must end."

We asked Northeastern faculty members from three different disciplines to explain what could follow this hard-to-process event.

How should parents and teachers talk about the events in Newtown, Conn., with young children? What particulars must they take into account?

Louis Kruger, an associate professor of counseling and applied educational psychology in the Bouvé College of Health Sciences: Adults should remain calm about the situation because many times children will get anxious when they're seeing that important adults in their lives are anxious. There are few things more important in a situation like this than being a good listener and ensuring children feel comfortable to express their feelings. Adults need to stick to the facts and not embellish them or ruminate on what they mean.

Explanations have to be developmentally appropriate. For early elementary school children, parents and teachers need brief, simple explanations with reassurances that they will be safe. Older children may be able to verbalize important questions and have an important dialogue about what they think. There's nothing wrong with parents communicating that this was a terrible event, but they also have to communicate that school is a very safe place.

Children shouldn't be watching news coverage on TV or getting news coverage elsewhere, from sources such as the radio or online. Instead, parents and teachers should be the primary source of information so they can observe their behavior and assure them that they will be safe.

In the aftermath of the Newtown shootings, what legal issues do you expect to come to the forefront of the

national discussion?

Daniel Medwed, a professor in the School of Law: I expect the primary response to this shooting to come from legislatures at the federal and state level. In law, there's the idea of "institutional competence," which asks what agency is best suited to take action. And in this case, various entities like the courts may try to take action, but I think legislation will be the biggest venue for debate and where we are most likely to see a response.

One likely consequence is a reinvigorated debate about the legality of assault weapons, which has faced scrutiny from the NRA and gun enthusiasts who have advanced the idea that such prohibitions are the start of a slippery slope: If you start banning assault weapons, where do you draw the line? But I suspect this tragedy will successfully renew the debate surrounding assault weapons in particular and, I hope, will result in federal legislation banning assault weapons and semiautomatic weapons, neither of which have real use in hunting or self-defense.

I think this shooting also raises new legal questions, such as whether a law could take into account who else at a gun owner's home could have access to the weapons. The guns used in the shooting didn't belong to Adam Lanza; they belonged to his mother, who acquired them legally. He didn't own the guns but had access to them—this could lead to new rules, possibly at the state level, about home safety and how to ensure that only a registered user has access to a firearm.

Could a legislative response adequately address the problem of gun violence in the U.S.?

Jack Levin, the Irving and Betty Brudnick Professor of Sociology and Criminology and one of the nation's leading experts on mass murder:

The problem is that we're so caught up with this case that we have tunnel vision and may not do anything that is effective. This is a very rare kind of case—the last time that an elementary school was targeted was in 1989—and since then the cases of school shootings haven't looked very much like the one in Newtown. Typically the killer is a student in middle or high school who wants revenge against his classmates after being bullied, harassed, humiliated, and ignored for many years.

If we really want to address the gun control issue, what we should do to prevent the murders of children is get handguns out of the hands of underage teenagers. We have about 12,000 single-victim murders every year in this country, most of which are perpetrated with handguns, not semiautomatic weapons, and many of which target children. That's compared to the about 100 victims of semiautomatic guns in this country on a yearly basis.

There was a federal assault-weapons ban in this country from 1994 to 2004 and it was during this period that we had a string of school massacres—including Columbine—committed with semiautomatic guns. It may be too late to address this issue. But we can still find ways to deal with this: We can break the culture of silence where people hear of threats and do nothing about it. We have already made inroads in that here in Massachusetts: We have seen plans for school shootings in places like Marshfield and New Bedford that were thwarted because students told an adult and authorities were able to intervene before it was too late.

Provided by Northeastern University

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