

Former Boston police officer explains why private ownership of firearms make no sense

December 19 2012, by Marjorie Howard

The horrific mass murder at an elementary school in Connecticut has again raised an outcry about the proliferation of guns in the United States. While not specifically addressing gun control, President Obama told a community meeting in Newtown, Conn., on Dec. 16 that he would work to engage professionals in mental health and law enforcement to try and prevent such tragedies from happening again. Proponents of gun-control laws are urging him to take measures to make laws more restrictive, and U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) has promised to introduce legislation in the next Congress to ban assault weapons as well as seek limits on sales of guns and large clips of ammunition.

Thomas Nolan, a lecturer at Tufts, spent 27 years as a Boston police officer before earning an Ed.D. from Boston University. When he was with the Boston Police Department, Nolan was a member of the elite mobile operations patrol unit and worked in the [Youth Violence](#) Strike Force. He ended his law enforcement career as a lieutenant and shift commander in the patrol division. He taught criminal justice at Boston University from 2004 to 2011, and then was a senior policy and program analyst at the Department of Homeland Security's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties in Washington, D.C. This fall he taught a course in the Experimental College called Forensic Behavioral Analysis.

As a police officer, Nolan says he witnessed people resorting to guns to resolve disputes, and he believes the proliferation of firearms in this country fosters a culture of violence. He spoke with Tufts Now about his views on gun laws and firearms based on his observations as a police

officer.

Tufts Now: What was your experience with guns as a police officer?

Thomas Nolan: If you are hired as a police officer in Massachusetts, you cannot carry a gun until you have at least 80 hours of training and have fired 1,000 rounds, so you have become intimately acquainted with that weapon. But for the general public in most of the country, no training is required. I can sell you a gun at a gun shop, and I have no idea if you can shoot it or what you want to do with it. It's like selling someone an iPod.

Which states have the most restrictive gun-control laws?

Massachusetts is among those having the strictest. In order to carry a concealed weapon, for example, you need a license from the chief of police in the town you live in or the town you work in. You have to go through a rigorous process that includes a criminal records check before you are even considered for a license, and if one is issued, it can take 60 to 90 days to get. Then you have to go through a training course to convince law enforcement you know how to use the weapon. It's done very carefully and is intended to be that way to ensure that only those who have a legitimate need can carry a concealed weapon.

What might be considered a legitimate need?

Say you are a restaurant owner, and every night when you close you have thousands of dollars to deposit in the bank. You could make a case to the police chief that everyone knows what time you close and that you have a lot of money on hand and need to be able to protect yourself.

Is it easy to get a license?

We have more than 350 police departments in Massachusetts, so there are some 350 people making the decision. Some are more lax than others. But even as a former Boston [police officer](#), I would have a tough time getting a license. I live and work here and would have to convince someone there's a reason I need a weapon.

What about the rest of the country?

When I worked for the [Department of Homeland Security](#) and traveled to many places around the country, when the topic of guns came up, I would ask trainees how many did not have a gun and no hands went up. In many places, people seem to feel there is an obligation that you have to protect yourself against some kind of attack from intruders, whoever they think that might be. And some people who are extremists have the mindset that this is the only way we have to protect ourselves from the federal government coming into our lives and communities and taking over everything, including their guns. Of course, that's a crazy, irrational thought. But don't be surprised to see a rush on buying weapons soon, because the topic will come up in Congress and people fear there will be a ban.

Some say if more people had guns, they could prevent such mass murders as occurred in Newtown or in the Aurora movie theater shootings, because an armed person could kill the murderer.

If we armed people, the carnage would increase exponentially. Take the Aurora movie theater shootings, for example. If we had people in the audience who were armed, it's safe to assume there would be an exchange of gunfire, but it would not necessarily result in the death of the shooter, who in this case had on body armor. People carrying guns

would have varying levels of proficiency about how to use firearms: some may be trained, and some might never have fired a weapon. I think it's a wrong-headed idea; the more people with guns, the more carnage you'll have. Do we give guns to school children? Do we arm teachers and principals?

Because of the age of most of the victims, do you believe the Connecticut shootings will bring about a change in gun laws?

We have a conversation about gun control every time there is an incident like this. I've been interviewed by the media about other shootings: after Congresswoman Giffords was shot, after the Virginia Tech shootings and after the Amish school shootings in Pennsylvania. Every time we have an instance of [mass murder](#), we revisit it. One would hope that these incidents would help suppress the power the National Rifle Association has in Washington. At some point, people with fortitude and courage have to stand up to the NRA, but whether they will is the question that remains to be answered.

Are there instances in which you think people should own firearms?

I can't consider a situation in which private ownership of firearms is appropriate. People will say there should be exceptions, such as the restaurant owner I mentioned, but I don't agree. As someone who carried a gun for most of my adult life, I don't see any rationale for anyone who is not in [law enforcement](#) or in the military carrying a firearm.

What about your colleagues in the police department?

I think most police officers would agree there are too many people licensed to carry concealed weapons who ought not to be, but most would probably endorse the notion of private ownership of firearms. Still, most officers have come into situations in which they've seen individuals who were licensed to carry a firearm who shouldn't have had one. You might pull someone over for running a red light and then you find out he has been drinking. And he has a gun, and it's legally owned, and you think, "What is this guy doing with a gun?"

Why do you think we have such a violent culture?

I think it's the ready availability and proliferation of high-powered firearms and certainly the way we socialize young men to resolve conflicts. Boys are taught to be competitive and to win and to use aggression to achieve those goals. Girls are taught to resolve conflicts through negotiation. We no longer see conflicts resolved with a fist fight or an argument or even a knife—they get resolved with a bullet. If the young man in Newtown didn't have access to so many guns and wasn't so familiar with them, what he did couldn't have been so easily accomplished. We want to think that this guy has to be crazy and disordered, and obviously there was a problem, but we may find he was never diagnosed with any kind of mental disorder. Certainly in other areas of the world, where guns aren't as available, it would have been much more difficult to carry out this atrocity.

Provided by Tufts University

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