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Gun Violence; The Endemic Epidemic

by Gary L. Yates

The Valentine's Day shooting at Northern Illinois University outside Chicago that killed five and injured 14 is only the latest mass shooting in a two-week outbreak of gun violence across the nation.

In Oxnard, Calif., a 15-year-old boy is shot and killed — apparently by a 14-year-old — at E.O. Green Junior High School in Los Angeles, a man suspected of murdering three family members kills one LAPD officer and wounds another before he is shot by a police sniper. In Kirkwood, Mo., a man fires into a city council meeting, killing five people — including two police officers — and wounding two. A female student at Louisiana Technical College in Baton Rouge, La., shoots and kills two classmates before turning the gun on herself. In Tinley Park, Ill, five women are gunned down in a Lane Bryant clothing store.

Like the explosive epidemics of malaria in many parts of Africa, gun violence is the pervasive public health disease of our culture. The statistics are dire.

Since 1960, more than one million Americans have died in firearm suicides, homicides and unintentional injuries.

In 2005, the most recent year for which complete statistics are available, 30,694 people were killed by firearms — an average of 84 people every day. Another 64,389 were injured, about 176 per day. In California, an average of three young people died every day from gunfire. African-Americans ages 12 to 24 make up just 1.6 percent of the state's population, yet in 2004 they constituted 29 percent of all firearm deaths and approximately 34 percent of all firearm homicides.

Firearms are the second most frequent cause of death overall for Americans ages 15 to 24. According to the Washington, D.C.-based Violence Policy Center, there are more than 200 million privately owned firearms in the United States — a third of which are handguns.

Even as we express our collective horror at tragedies like the ones in California, Illinois, Louisiana and Missouri, the truth is that we are addicted to gun violence. Bob Herbert of the New York Times once noted that the "Gun violence in America is as common as the sunrise. We celebrate it, romanticize it, eroticize it." Above all, we market it — in movies, music, television, radio, books, magazines and newspapers. In each generation, society's fascination with gun violence as a quick and reliable answer to all conflicts can be measured by such popular fare as "Gunsmoke," to "Pulp Fiction," to "Smoking Aces" to "Grand Theft Auto."

We have become so desensitized to violence that we're no longer outraged unless it's on the scale of Columbine or Virginia Tech, the 2007 shooting that left 32 people dead. Although we all hold deep beliefs about the immorality of violence, we distance ourselves from it through the pornography of gun violence as entertainment, which reduces real horror to abstract images . . . gunplay, the enjoyment of watching people "off" each other.

It is not lack of knowledge or technical prowess that keeps us from reducing gun violence; the obstacles are ideological and political. What seem to be technical arguments about our ability to control the use of firearms are really moral and political arguments about what we are willing or not willing to do.

We have the level of gun violence we do because we have arranged our social and economic life in certain ways rather than others. Let's not pretend that we simply do not know what to do to reduce gun violence. Rather, we as a society have decided that the benefits of changing those conditions aren't worth the costs.

We have an obligation not to trivialize this subject, not to distance ourselves from it and not to withdraw from it. While we may wish to avoid gun violence, it does not always avoid us. If you have any doubts, ask the families of the men, women and children who have been killed these past few weeks.