

Campus violence

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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Mourning and Mulling

By CHARLES M. BLOW, Published: July 20, 2012 [392 Comments](#)

America is aching.



Damon Winter/The New York Times

Charles M. Blow

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Little Appetite For Stricter Gun Laws

"Do you have a gun in
your home?"

Yes

45%

"In terms of gun laws in the United States, which of the following would you prefer to see happen: enforce the current gun laws more strictly and NOT pass new gun laws or pass new gun laws in addition to enforcing the current laws more strictly?"

Pass new laws in addition

35

"In general, do you feel that the laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more strict, less strict, or kept as they are now?"

More strict

43

Less strict/kept as now

55

"Are you for or against a law which would make it illegal to manufacture, sell, or possess semi-automatic guns known as assault rifles?"

For

43

Against

53

*Source: Gallup poll
conducted Oct. 6-9, 2011*

There are some events that we never grow numb to, things that weigh heavily on our sense of humanity and national psyche.

Early Friday morning, 24-year-old James Holmes, masked and armed, entered a crowded movie theater in Aurora, Colo., and opened fire. After things settled, at least 12 people were dead and 59 were left wounded.

It is on days like this that we are reminded of how much more alike than different we are, when we see that tears have no color, when ideologies melt into a common heart broken by sorrow.

But it is also on days like this that the questions invariably come.

They are questions about the shooter. How deep must the hole have been in his life? How untenable was the ache? How cold must the heart have grown? When did he cross the line from malcontent to monster?

But there are also questions for us as a country and as a people. We are called to question our values and our laws, and those obviously include our gun laws.

My own feelings on the matter are complicated.

I grew up in a small town in northern Louisiana — in the sticks. Everyone there seemed to own guns, even the children. My brothers slept beneath a gun rack that hung over their bed. Women carried handguns for protection. Even now, my oldest brother is an amateur gun dealer, buying and selling guns at his local gun shows.

There are parts of America where guns are simply part of the culture, either for hunting and keeping the vermin out of the garden (there are more humane methods of doing this, of course, but some people simply have their ways), or for collecting.

(According to [a 2011 Gallup poll](#), 45 percent of Americans have a gun in their home.)

But, as a child, I also saw how guns could be used in a fit of anger or after a few swigs of liquor. And I have seen the damage they do to the fabric of society in big cities where criminals and cowards alike use them to settle disputes and even scores.

While I hesitate to issue blanket condemnations about gun ownership — my upbringing simply doesn't support that — common sense would seem to dictate that it is prudent and wise to consider the place of guns in modern societies. It has been some time since we have needed to raise a militia, but senseless violence is all too common. The right to bear arms is constitutional, but the right to be safe even if you

don't bear arms would seem universal. We must ask ourselves the hard question: Can both rights be equally protected and how can they best be balanced?

As Howard Steven Friedman, a statistician and health economist for the United Nations, [wrote for The Huffington Post](#) in April:

“America’s homicide rates, incarceration rates and gun ownership rates are all much higher than other wealthy countries. While the data associated with crime is imperfect, these facts all point to the idea that America is more violent than many other wealthy countries.” This is not the way in which we should seek to excel.

There are whole swaths of gun owners who don't use their guns in a criminal way. But many of the people who use guns to commit murder are also law-abiding until they're not. (Holmes's only previous brush with the law seems to have been a 2011 traffic summons.) We shouldn't simply wait for the bodies to fall to separate the wheat from the chaff.

One step in the right direction would be to reinstate the assault weapons ban. Even coming from a gun culture, I cannot rationalize the sale of assault weapons to everyday citizens. ([The Washington Post reported](#) that Holmes had a shotgun, two pistols and an AR-15 assault rifle, all legally purchased.)

But this will be an uphill battle because the National Rifle Association has been extremely effective at promoting its agenda and sowing fears that gun rights are in jeopardy even when they are not. Much of that campaign has been aimed at painting President Obama as an enemy of the Second Amendment, and it has been exceedingly successful.

That 2011 Gallup poll, in a reversal from previous polls, found that most people are now against an assault weapons ban. (In general, the desire for stricter gun control laws has been falling for the last two decades.)

We simply have to take some reasonable steps toward making sure that all our citizens are kept safer — those with guns and those without.

We can't keep digging graves where common ground should be.