

It's about the guns

Most people won't commit acts of violence. But anyone could.

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(Illustration by bubaone / DigitalVision / Getty)

The federal gun law enacted this summer includes \$8.5 billion for mental health services. This is a welcome infusion of cash into a chronically underfunded service area. But will it significantly reduce gun violence?

The research suggests some skepticism. The Violence Project has created a large database of mass shooters and studied them in depth. According to the *New York Times*, the project's researchers determined that mental illness is not a major contributing factor. Sociologist Jeffrey Swanson agrees. "If we were to cure serious mental illnesses," he told the *Times*, "violence would go down by 4 percent."

What most perpetrators do have in common, according to the Violence Project, is a recent life crisis, the sort of thing—grief, job loss, a breakup—that can overwhelm anyone's coping mechanisms. Such crises are often visible to others, so intervention

may be possible. But the larger takeaway is how common they are. Nearly everyone has one at some point.

The new gun law implicitly scapegoats people with mental illness. But its larger problem is its general focus on the alleged *who* of gun violence. Along with mental health funding the law includes background checks for young gun buyers, restrictions for minors with certain criminal convictions, an expanded capacity to confiscate guns from certain individuals, and a clampdown on straw purchases. These provisions are all aimed at keeping guns away from certain people identified as high risk.

But if the primary risk factor is a life crisis, then this net is far too narrow. The potential *who* behind gun violence is not some well-defined subset; it's society in general. So the core problem to address is not the *who* but the *what*: our society's ever more vast and powerful arsenal of weapons. The new law in no way restricts the number, power, or capacity of the guns the rest of us—those not flagged as high risk—can own. These are the gun control policies that would make the biggest difference, because it's hard to predict who the *who* will be. It won't be most people, but it could be anyone.

Many US gun owners are fiercely resistant to this idea. They're the law-abiding good guys, they say, arming themselves for protection from the bad guys. But Christians should know better, because Christians are familiar with the concept of sin (see "Sinner-saints with guns," April 25, 2018). We have different understandings of the relationship between sin and salvation, the relative importance of individual and collective sin, and what exactly counts as sin in the first place. But we are all inheritors of the book of Romans, in which Paul argues forcefully that sin is universal, seductive, and incredibly powerful. We don't control it; it controls us—all of us.

This should make us hesitant to predict who will and won't respond to a life crisis with violence. The new gun bill was worth enacting; it was the most the politics would allow, and it will save lives. But to get serious about gun control, we're going to have to try to control the actual guns—not just certain people we don't trust to have them.