

Gun play: Time to revive a public discussion

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 17, 2003](#) issue

As bombs were dropping in Baghdad, the U.S. Supreme Court took up the question of whether it is legitimate to consider racial identity in setting university admission policies. Meanwhile, Congress debated the budget, including an unprecedented tax cut. Largely unnoticed was the passage by the House of Representatives of the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, which exempts the makers, distributors and sellers of guns from liability for gun violence.

This bill is a response to some 30 lawsuits that have been filed against the gun industry by municipalities, including Chicago, New York, Cleveland and Detroit. Given the absence of decisive legislation on the issue, such lawsuits offer an important way to try to curb the spread of guns.

Though the issue of gun violence in our homes, streets and schools seems to have disappeared from the headlines, it hit me with a jolt during Holy Week. First I read about a murder in a crowded high school gym in New Orleans. Four young men entered the gym and shot 15-year-old Jonathan Williams with an AK-47. A .45-caliber pistol was found in Williams's pocket. Why don't we seem to be concerned that an AK-47, a military assault-type weapon, is in the hands of teenagers, not to mention the .45 in the dead youth's pocket?

Then I read about a how six-year-old Chicago boy was playing with a loaded handgun in his grandparents' home and fatally shot himself.

Later in the week I learned that a classmate of my 12-year-old grandson had gone to the restroom, pulled a gun out of her backpack and killed herself. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Then in late April I read about how a 14-year-old in Pennsylvania shot his principal and then turned a gun on himself.

Events like this are happening not only every day, but eight times a day. In 2000, 3,042 children and teenagers were killed by guns; 1,806 were homicides, 1,007 suicides and 229 accidents. Every day five children are murdered and three commit suicide with guns. There were 28,663 gun-related deaths in 2000. Firearms have killed more than 28,000 Americans every year since 1972.

I have heard all the arguments against gun control. I am not talking here about interfering with hunters or target shooters. I am talking about a society that is inundated by guns. A revived public discussion is needed. (A good resource is the HELP Network—an organization my congregation supports.) Many politicians won't touch the issue because of the power of the gun lobby. It's time for the rest of us to speak up.