

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: No easy way to stop mass shootings

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In the aftermath of the Texas mass shooting, the usual calls to “do something about guns” are being made.

To find out what we can do, I asked Madison Police Chief Mike Koval for his thoughts.

“The genie is out of the bottle,” Koval says, noting the high number of mass shootings in recent years.

We can start with the fact that the Texas shooter had been discharged from the Air Force for beating up his ex-wife and her infant son, but that information was never entered into the FBI database. So the shooter was able to buy several guns.

“It is disturbing that that is not an isolated incident,” Koval says. “It is pervasive the under-reporting on the part of the armed forces, and that’s very concerning.”

Koval says mass shooters with a history of domestic violence is not an anomaly.

“Why we don’t put that in the database mystifies me,” he says.

The chief is very aware of the many techniques used to get around existing gun laws. Girlfriends or best friends or even moms can be straw purchasers who buy the guns for people who aren’t allowed to have them. Often they are compensated by the gun user for doing so.

And there’s more.

“In urban settings, we get human holsters,” Koval says, referring to people with no criminal history or even a minor who will hold the gun until the firearm is needed by a more threatening adult.

Koval would like to close the so-called gun show loophole. But that is easier said than done. Licensed gun dealers at shows already require background checks for buyers.

The problem is when private individuals sell guns to each other in the parking lot or a hallway at the gun show.

Passing a law that requires the seller to do a background check on a buyer doesn't solve the enforcement challenge.

"When there is a will, there is a way," Koval says, "and they will find a way to get a gun if they are so inclined."

A good-faith effort to prevent people from getting guns who don't qualify makes sense, according to the chief. He also supports early intervention when a person's bad behavior sends out red flags to authorities.

"I support preventive means and would like to enhance and expand treatment options for mental illness," Koval says.

It would be helpful if we could start by enforcing laws we already have on the books. The Texas shooter should never have been able to buy a gun over the counter, based on what we already knew. Somebody at the Air Force simply forgot to pass on the data.

Beyond that, America does have a love affair with violence. Europeans have frontal nudity on their commercials, but American movies are too violent for European audiences. Many Americans seem to get more upset about wardrobe malfunctions at Super Bowl halftime shows than fatal shootings day and night across the country.

I still remember Bobby Kennedy in 1968 saying, "Too often we honor swagger and bluster and the wielders of force." And channeling the Kingston Trio, also from the '60s, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" anyway?

*Mitch Henck is a Madison, Wisconsin based commentator, broadcaster and standup comic. The Mitch Henck Show streams at www.madisontalks.com and you can find Mitch's podcasts there. Watch Mitch's Daily Video Blog, "Two Minutes with Mitch," weekdays at madison.com.
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