

Gun Rights, Gun Control and a Local Push to Tax Guns and Their Ammo



Ambitious and certain to draw criticism, President Barack Obama's plan to rid the nation of the most powerful weapons on the market and attempt to arrest mass and everyday shootings was expected by Congress Wednesday, marking a sharp turn in a decades-long fight to curb America's gun violence.

As the debate was playing out in Washington, several local and national leaders gathered at the [University of Chicago](#) Tuesday evening to discuss guns and policy, with Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, whose city holds the dubious "murder capital" title, among the group and pushing sweeping gun control legislation that cracks down on assault weapons. Also on the panel was Democratic political consultant David Axelrod, who this week said that the [National Rifle Association](#)'s recent assertion that Congress would not enact the sort of change that Obama and others were pressing, was off base. In fact, he said, real legislation will squeeze through the legislative process and signal real change in the nation's laws and gun dialogue. Also in attendance was the head of the [University of Chicago CrimeLab](#), who noted that while the United States has managed to improve its count of more common crime – property theft, etc. – we are dubiously at the top in terms of violence.

While this played out, the NRA issued statements condemning the actions of New York lawmakers over a sweeping move late Monday-early Tuesday to ban assault and other high-powered weapons while also addressing the difficult, more open issue

of mental illness. This comes after media reports over the past week showing that mental illness is, seemingly, not often considered by gun dealers when selling weapons in this nation.

So even as Washington remains center stage this week in the fight to curb gun violence, increase purchase-point background checks, better mind the mental health of buyers and put tighter limits on the legal gun market – a rights and safety battle that has gone on for decades but whose profile was fast raised by last month's Newtown school massacre – the ramifications were fast cascading through the country.

Here, in Illinois – and, more narrowly, high-crime Cook County and Chicago – most of the political bigs have joined in a loud call to end the bloodshed that claimed upwards of 500 lives last year. In fact, Cook County, even before the Connecticut shooting rampage that killed 20 children and six school employees at Sandy Hook Elementary, as well as the gunman and his mother, was on to a somewhat different and unique idea: Tax bullets and filter that money into hospitals to care for those wounded by gunfire. The slayings also counted some 100 minors among the victims – and many teenagers are also counted among the suspects or those arrested in the slayings.

Also in Illinois, the battle over concealed-carry permits or licenses has restarted after a state ban was recently declared unconstitutional. Before Illinois lifted the ban, 49 states had already allowed people to carry firearms with a permit.

According to Richard Pearson, executive director of the [Illinois State Rifle Association](#), the decision to allow people to carry concealed weapons would actually decrease violence, noting most mass shootings such as the Newtown shooting and the theater shooting in Aurora, CO earlier last year occurred in gun-free zones, where citizens were not allowed to have guns.

“So these gun-free zones become magnets for thugs and crazy

people to attack other people because they know they can't defend themselves," Pearson said.

Although it is too early to see the impact of the lift, Illinois' youth is deeply affected by firearms and, according to the [Children's Defense Fund](#), the state ranks among the top 10 in per capita gun-related homicide rates among children and teens.

And, as with other cities and states, policymakers here – as well as academics, editorialists, grassroots organizations and established institutions – Newtown was the impetus for upping the volume and speed of the political and everyday conversation on guns.

But while big names like Emanuel and Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn, also a Democrat, drew much of the attention here – there is more focus growing up around Preckwinkle's gun and bullet taxes. Preckwinkle, who also wants to ban assault weapons and joins Emanuel and Quinn at events on the issue, has been pushing twin taxes since October. The tax on gun purchases has passed and new restrictions take effect in April, with a planned \$25 tax on firearm purchases to help pay for the sharp costs of public health and public safety. With the money raised, the county plans to shift \$2 million toward violence prevention, intervention and reduction.

What remains an open question is whether the other proposal – to tax bullets and ammunition for these guns – will also get the nod and take effect to offset medical costs even more.

According to Cook County spokesman Owen Kilmer, the expected funds derived from the gun tax will primarily go to non-profit organizations that have known experience in violence prevention. At least \$100,000 of the total will go towards education, enforcement, and straw purchases, or firearms purchased legally but then used for criminal activity.

Also, a seven-member advisory board at the county level will

not only oversee the \$2 million but also seek out effective models of gun control, and study the possible addition of a youth component.

But violence has always been a problem in Chicago with 2,051 shootings occurring in 2011 and about 700 more last year.

Chicago and Cook County residents met news of the tax and violence prevention pushes with as much skepticism as hope.

Those interviewed for the story, and polled by local media, apparently see the problem as less to do with the availability of guns, and more to do with youth falling through the cracks in the justice and child welfare systems, with broken families that, perhaps unintentionally, spin youth into the open arms of gangs through neglect, violence, and the chaos of troubled households.

With the tax still a couple of months off, there is no good way to gauge its potential. Yet, there are those like Briceson William, 28, a graduate of Austin High School on Chicago's troubled West Side, who said the real problem lies with unemployment, deep poverty, poorly planned housing – and law enforcement, who, according to some crime and academic studies, are quick to throw minors in jail, crippling their opportunity to earn a decent living.

Mark Iris, a professor of political science at [Northwestern University](#), attributes the high number of youth in jail to zero-tolerance policies here and elsewhere in the nation that criminalize ordinary classroom misbehavior. Taken with the high number of police in schools after the high-crime 1980s and 1990s – an issue given greater profile after Newtown – the zero-tolerance policies have, according to many of the same studies, created an atmosphere in schools where police interactions and quick responses to students and disciplinary problems have raised the number of police-juvenile interactions and, consequently, trips to police stations,

courts, and even juvenile detention.

In fact, juvenile detention in Chicago has been a topic for debate. Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle has said the high rate of incarceration of minors should be wholly eliminated, that juvenile detention under her watch should be “blown up,” and, ultimately, that “we shouldn’t have a jail for kids. Period.”

According to the [Chicago Youth Justice Data Project](#), in 2009 alone, the number of youth detained in Cook County juvenile detention centers was 5,608 – and roughly 84 percent of that population was African American, 12 percent Hispanic and 3 percent white. Overall population statistics for Chicago, which is in Cook County, show a split of about one-third black, one-third Hispanic and one-third white.

Not only is juvenile detention heavily skewed towards the black population today, but go back 10 years to a 2002 study by [Human Rights Watch](#) and the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), which showed that, very often, youth in solitary confinement do not receive any kind of educational training. Without such training, black and other minority youth are, by definition, ill-equipped to make a decent living once released and actually contribute to society instead of dragging it down with the high medical costs associated with violence, the steep costs of incarceration and courts and the high number of police. Studies show that turning schools into a sort of “police state,” as some legislators at the local and national level have put it, actually retards progress by halting a minor’s potential before it has a chance to be realized.

For example, once a youth enters the juvenile system – especially through the justice side but also through agencies like the [Illinois Department of Children and Family Services](#) or the county’s Public Guardian’s office – and have their records marred with a felony, the chances of them earning a job quickly diminish. Additionally, without proper education,

the window of opportunity gets smaller.

“[When] in a juvenile center of some sort, or juvenile detention setting, it’s certainly going to disrupt [the youth’s] school progress, and realistically for many of these youths, they would have been at risk, [in a] disadvantaged position anyway,” Iris said.

“We can put the guns down if we get money, jobs,” William said. “[The government] gives us nothing to do. We’re sitting around twiddling our fingers all day long with nothing to do, looking at each other, walking down the street daily. I mean, something’s bound to happen.”

Angela Reavers, 36, an accountant from the South Side of Chicago, agreed that violence spins from a vicious cycle – one that often begins with the justice system or the child welfare system. And once a child is caught up in that system, the crossover between child welfare and justice is frequent and it becomes increasingly difficult to break free to a kind of normal life.

For her part, Reavers said, many times when young men and women are released from jail, they aren’t rehabilitated or given the proper tools to find a job. According to a 2006 report released by the Justice Policy Institute, the system is weighted heavily against blacks and Hispanics as white youth tend to have better access to programs and services.

Locked into this cycle, they many times ask themselves, “What do I do to live, to eat?” and in search of money, head out to the streets to find a way to provide for themselves. According to William, this plight was not only his, but many other’s as well.

After winning back his freedom, William said he has had to “hustle,” or sell whatever items he can find: clothes, socks, and shoes. “I gotta eat,” he said.

And so the lure of community in gangs becomes all the more appealing. Reavers said much of the violence and feeling of separation that feeds the gang network stems from a lack of a father figure. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2011 report, 51.2 percent of African American children in one-parent families lived with their mothers, whereas 3.5 percent of children in single-parent families lived with their fathers.

"Young men go to gangs because their fathers are not at home," said Reavers, explaining the youth's need for a sense of family. "And to a certain extent, gangs care; that's what [youth] are looking for."

But despite his conviction that Chicago has failed its youth and his belief that gun violence will only increase, William acknowledges that improvements have been made to better the lives of the neighborhood's youth.

"I see they're starting to [do] a lot of after school programs and stuff like that," William said. "That's good."

Just across the street from where William and his friends spent the afternoon, East Garfield's Richard T. Crane Technical Preparatory High School offers after-school work-study programs for its students to learn basic job-finding skills. Students like Marcus Hallam, 18, a senior, leave class early in order to attend a program where students are taught skills such as interviewing techniques. He is preparing to apply to colleges and possibly seek a sports scholarship.

Despite the acceleration of laws and talk and promises after such a violent year in Chicago, and the Sandy Hook tragedy, finding a solution to gun violence remains daunting. Small steps might be the answer, according to some observers, and Cook County's proposals to tax weapons to raise funds for uninsured victims of shootings, which make up about 70 percent of victims, could prove a concrete start.

But, this too was met with some hesitancy, as William said he sees no clear purpose to the tax. “People [are] still going to get shot. [The politicians] [are] only taxing them for money [purposes], for their purpose, for their pockets. They aren’t taxing them for our pockets, [there isn’t any] money coming out here for us. The politicians in Illinois are untruthful, can’t be trusted.”

What many say is most important is that violence – chiefly that committed with firearms – needs to be stopped for upcoming generations. Termaine Johnson, 16, is a sophomore at Crane Tech. While he sees the county’s tax push as a “nice” way to raise revenues for gunshot victims, ultimately what he wants is an end to the violence that so bloodies Chicago and hurts the reputation of a city that is otherwise so prominent in business and culture.

“People...dying left and right...for nothing,” he said. “I just wish it could stop.”

This story appears in [The Chicago Bureau](#). Bureau Editor Eric Ferkenhoff contributed to this story.

Photo by Natalie Krebs.