



OP-ED: Tragedy in Oakland and Oregon

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By Barbara Parker, Oakland City Attorney

Once again, all of us are trying to process news of yet another mass shooting, this time in Roseburg, Oregon.

Another heavily armed, angry and likely deranged young man made an incomprehensible decision to murder total strangers on a school campus.

Was there any motive? A desperate attempt to feel powerful? An expression of mental illness that has no rational explanation? Is it just an act of evil? Or a combination of these things?

We have a hard time understanding the “why” of these tragedies. But we do know the “how.” The New York Times reported that the murderer was armed with six guns during the rampage, and had many other guns at home.

We experienced the same kind of tragedy in Oakland in 2012, when a former student shot and killed seven people at Oikos University.

As horrific as mass shootings are, the number of people killed in these crimes in Oregon and Oakland is dwarfed by the number killed in individual shootings on the streets of our dear city every year.

On Sept. 30, the day before the shooting in Oregon, an artist working on a mural under a freeway overpass on West Street was shot and killed.

Artist Antonio Ramos was one of four people killed in a matter of days in separate incidents in Oakland. We have had 73 homicides so far this year, most of them committed with firearms.

I wholeheartedly agree with President Obama’s moving remarks about the Oregon shooting. As a nation we have become numb in some ways to these horrific events.

But if we are numb to mass shootings, we are practically oblivious to the thousands of Americans who are killed by guns every year in our country, including dozens every year in Oakland, almost all young men of color.

According to CNN, in the last decade, 406,496 people have been killed by guns in America. As CNN put it, for every American killed by terrorism in the U.S. and around the world, more than 1,000 died from firearms inside the U.S. during the most recent decade.

It is worth quoting the president at length about our lack of a response to this massive loss of life:

“When Americans are killed in mine disasters, we work to make mines safer. When Americans are killed in floods and hurricanes, we make communities safer. When roads are unsafe, we fix them to reduce auto fatalities. We have seatbelt laws because we know it saves lives. So the notion that gun violence is somehow different, that our freedom and our Constitution prohibits any modest regulation of how we use a deadly weapon, when there are law-abiding gun owners all across the country who could hunt and protect their families and do everything they do under such regulations doesn’t make sense.”

I support the handgun bans that the U.S. Supreme Court struck down in Washington, D.C. and Chicago in 5-4 decisions in 2008 and 2010, respectively. In fact, the City of Oakland signed on to amicus briefs in the federal courts of appeal and the U.S. Supreme Court asking the high court to uphold those bans. Sadly, the Supreme Court struck them down.

But even in the current legal context, there still are plenty of smart ideas for regulating firearms without “infringing” on gun ownership.

Some common sense regulations: universal background checks and licensing for all gun purchases; a federal law mandating reporting of lost and stolen firearms to prevent straw sales to criminals; raising the legal age for buying a gun to 21; a renewed “assault weapons” ban to limit the sale to civilians of weapons made for no other purpose than to kill large numbers of human beings in the shortest possible time in war.

We also must deal with the “why”: hopelessness, poverty, lack of opportunity, discrimination, untreated mental illness and fetishization of guns in our national psyche, to name a few factors.

I am heartbroken today for families in Oakland, Oregon and elsewhere. The task before us seems almost impossible.

If you want to make a difference now, please support the Attitudinal Healing Connection, a local group that supports art and education to break the cycle of violence in Oakland. The AHC is organizing mural projects in Oakland, including the one on West Street that Mr. Ramos was working on when he was killed.