Deaths from conflict outweigh gun violence

by Mark Pavilons

Like a broken record, we're singing the same tune regarding guns and gun control. We're confronted with what seems like an epidemic of gun violence, both here and south of the border.

But close examination of the statistics and facts paints a bit of a different picture. I think one thing we can agree on is that humans kill and humans hate, and will continue to do so.

Yes, the numbers can be daunting, even startling. In 2017, almost 40,000 Americans died in firearms related incidents. All together, 1.6 million Americans died from gunfire since 1968, more than U.S. casualties in all previous wars combined!

These are stats and pretty much the only thing U.S. citizens and politicians agree on.

A growing voice of concerned citizens and researchers want to study gun violence as a public health issue. Similar to automobile accidents and impaired driving, the ramifications are huge in our society. Through research, study, awareness and eduction, we've managed to get the message across regarding drinking and driving. And yet, police forces across Ontario and our country continue to battle this issue.

Over the last decade (2008-2017), 374,340 people in the U.S. were killed by motor vehicles, and 342,439 were killed by firearms. Despite the similar number of lives lost, research spending on motor vehicle deaths is nearly 16 times greater than on firearm-related fatalities.

Yes, the mass shootings that take a handful of lives make the headlines across North America. But these are still rare occurrences.

Lives lost to guns are roughly the same as lives lost daily on our roads.

Roughly 60% of firearm deaths in the U.S. in 2017 were suicides. That's 23,854 people who took their own lives and most were older, white males.

Conversely, one study showed that black men under 20 in the U.S. were the primary victims of firearm homicides.

Another sad fact is that overall, the rate of gun homicide is 25 times higher in the U.S. than in other high-income countries.

Data from the FBI shows that handguns are by far the most likely type of firearm to cause a fatality. In 2017, handguns were used in 7,032 of the 7,886 firearm-related homicide deaths. In the U.S., only about 13 per cent of all suicide attempts succeed. However, up to 90 per cent of attempts using firearms result in death.

What's also statistically important are those incidents involving guns that don't end in death, only injury. Best guesses put those numbers at roughly 130,000 per year.

The numbers here in Canada and the GTA are much, much lower, yet you wouldn't know it from the vocal reaction every time there's a shooting incident.

According to Statistics Canada, there were 130 homicides committed with a handgun in 2016, the most in more than a decade. Handguns accounted for 21 per cent of the total homicides that year, and 58 per cent of the shooting homicides. Again, suicides by firearm account for almost 78% of deaths.

According to our federal government, while overall crime rates in Canada are much lower today than decades ago, for the several consecutive years the total number of firearm-related homicides in Canada has increased, reaching 223 in 2016, 44 more than the previous year. In 2016 alone, police reported 141 gang-related homicides, 45 more than in 2015. Since 2013, firearms murders in Canada's largest cities have almost doubled from 134 to 223. In Canada, three out of 10 violent gun crimes happen outside of a major city.

From this, we can take away that the issue isn't really guns, handguns, or gun control. It all comes down to people, many with mental health issues. We are by no means an angry mob of gun-totting killers.

We North Americans also tend to ignore the horrible statistics of violent deaths around the world on a daily basis. Innocent civilians who die from violence in the Middle East make our gun data seem almost trivial.

At least 3,812 Afghan civilians were killed or wounded in the first half of 2019 in the war against militant groups, including a big increase in the number of casualties caused by government and foreign forces, according to the United Nations.

Just recently, we've seen some unimaginable mass bombings.

At least 91 people were killed in suicide bomb attacks by suspected al-Qaida terrorists in the Saudi Arabian capital of Riyadh. Officials said they found the bodies of nine suicide bombers.

At a wedding in Afghanistan, a suicide bomber killed 80 and wounded close to 200.

Natural disasters in other parts of the world routinely kill hundreds, if not thousands on a regular basis.

In 2018, an estimated 10,300 people died in natural disaster events worldwide. The earthquake and resulting tsunami in Indonesia was the most deadly catastrophe in 2018 with 2,256 reported deaths. Hydrological events, such as floods, have affected the largest number of people in the last decade.

Here, we complain about flooded basements during heavy rain storms, while our counterparts in developing nations are being swept away.

I think the underlying sentiment here is to consider our fellow human beings. Unnecessary and avoidable death is always a waste. So much lost potential!

Let's help one another, not by debating laws and changes, but digging deep into the human condition. Let's work harder to prevent suicides; let's put more efforts into mental health, and let's all work toward lessening bigotry, hatred and racism.?We need to create a supportive atmosphere where violence is not the answer.