

Aurora Colorado and The Importance of Social Capital

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Social capital is that set of reflexes we absorb from our culture, religion, families and our ancestors. It shapes how we react to crisis and opportunity.

In 19th century Ireland, the Quakers were famously honest in their dealings, competitive in business, but fair to employees and customers, open to new ideas and encouraging of enterprise and social endeavour, and antagonistic to violence in all its forms. This benefitted them, by making it relatively easy to borrow, attract and retain the smartest and most reliable employees, reduce to the minimum the needs for contracts and lawyers, and be accepted by the majority of the population; they were also the most active group in helping mitigate the hugely malign effects of the 1845 potato famine. But their social capital also helped adorn the society of which they were such a positive part. More generally, cultures that resist populist impulses, encourage innovation and enterprise, foster peace, make sometimes difficult choices informed by evidence, and take a long view (including protecting nature), will be rich in social capital and this is likely to enrich other forms of capital.

Aurora Colorado has been rich in at least one form of social capital. It is well known for having one of the most sensible and progressive water charging systems in the world. Householders have been charged on the basis of increasing block prices, and provided with support for investing in water saving devices. And this has allowed the city to reduce its consumption considerably, save on investment and ensure that water is available to all and also meet the needs of a rapidly growing population.

Unfortunately, its stock of social capital stock has now been diminished; its reputation will be coloured in future by the tragedy of the shooting to death of 12 patrons in a cinema on July 20, 2012, who were there to view the premier of the new Batman film, *The Dark Knight Rises*; over 50 others were injured, some critically. The suspect is a 24 year old neuroscience graduate student, who was arrested outside the theatre with a semiautomatic assault rifle and other weapons, all of which he purchased legally.

It is part of a sad tradition in the US, where shooting sprees periodically occur including (numbers killed in brackets): Austin, Texas in 1966 (16), Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania in 1982 (13), San Diego, California in 1984 (21), Edmund, Oklahoma in 1986 (14), Killeen Texas in 1991 (23), Littleton, Colorado in 1999 (13), Blacksburg, Virginia in 2007 (32), Tucson, Arizona in 2011(6) – the latter was associated with an assassination attempt on then Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords.

A few features are characteristic:

- The killings are undertaken mainly by Caucasian young men (an exception to the latter is Cho Seung-Hui, the killer in the Blacksburg Virginia case, who was born in South Korea) typically acting alone, and with a history of aloneness –no girlfriends, few if any close friends;
- They do not have criminal records, and the shootings occur in relatively small cities and towns;
- They account for a tiny percentage of the total firearm related deaths – the majority of gun-related deaths in the United States are suicides – 17,352 (55.6%) of the total 31,224 firearm-related deaths in 2007 were due to suicide, while 12,632 (40.5%) were homicide deaths;
- They are not unique to the US – one year ago, Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people in Norway – but the pattern in the US is more enduring and pronounced;
- The control of the types of weapons that can be purchased in the US and by whom has loosened since 2004, supported by the public. The passage in 1994 of a ban on certain semi-automatic firearms is said to have contributed to the electoral defeat of the Democratic Speaker of the House (Tom Foley) and the victory of Republicans in both houses in 1994; the 1994 law lapsed in 2004, and there is no prospect of its renewal;
- U.S. citizens own 270 million of the world's 875 million known firearms, and about 4.5 million of the 8 million new guns manufactured worldwide each year are purchased in the United States. Teenage gang members cite the need to protect themselves as the reason for having and using guns. This raises the question: is the genie irreversibly out of the bottle?

Why are guns so freely available in the US, and would controlling of access make any difference?

Amongst the more spurious rationales for free access is the often expressed view that if people of malign intent can't kill with guns, they will find other ways. But the solution is to also choke off as far as possible those other avenues, including bomb making equipment. And most other weapons are not as lethal as automatic firearms, and their equivalents.

An Irish example: an individual (male, 24) was arrested for stabbing a number of guests at a concert attended by 45,000 in Dublin's Phoenix Park July 7, 2012. All but one of those injured have been discharged from hospital. If he had instead conducted the assault with a semiautomatic weapon, the outcome would probably have been orders of magnitude more lethal.

A more substantive argument is that it is allowed under the Second Amendment to the US Constitution which came into law in December 1791 as one of the 10 elements in the Bill of Rights:

‘A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.’

But the right to provide conditions for access is also recognised in decisions of the Supreme Court, echoing George Washington’s observation:

‘A free people ought not only to be armed, but disciplined.’

Based in the evidence we have, when indiscipline combines with ready access to lethal weapons, innocent people die in large numbers.

Is the US exceptional?

The data below are indicative only; they are derived from a variety of disparate sources, and some are old, relating to outcomes in the 1990s. The US is in the second highest death rate cluster, together with Brazil, Panama, Mexico etc. The lowest group included Ireland, Scotland and England and Wales. There is a wide range of firearm related mortality rates in Europe, with Finland, France and Switzerland relatively high at over 60% of the US rate.

Table 1. Indicative data on Firearm Deaths per 100,000 Population in one year.

Country Group in descending order	Deaths from firearms per 100,000 in one year	Comment
South Africa (74.57), Colombia, El Salvador, Jamaica, Honduras, Guatemala, Swaziland	74.57-37.16	
Brazil (14.15), Estonia, Panama, Mexico, US (10.27), Philippines, Argentina	14.15-9.19	
Seventeen countries ranging from Paraguay (7.35) to Israel (3.0)	7.35-3.0	This category includes a number of European countries – Finland (6.35), N Ireland (6.82), Switzerland (6.4), France (6.35), Austria (4.56), Norway (4.39), Portugal (3.72), Belgium (3.48), Slovenia

		(3.07)
Thirty five countries, ranging from Italy (2.95) to Chile (0.06)	2.95-0.06	Includes Ireland (1.21), England and Wales (0.46) and Scotland (0.58)

The Northern Ireland data are elevated by the killing during the troubles. The total deaths over the 1969-2010 period – 3568 – exceed the number killed on 9/11 in New York. Civilians in Ireland took the brunt of the Irish deaths, accounting for over half of the total (Table 2). Bombs and bullets account for most of the deaths, but in what proportion I don't know.

Table 2. Number of Conflict related deaths in Northern Ireland, 1969-2010

	Civilian	British Security	Republican Paramilitaries	Loyalist Paramilitaries	Irish Security	Total
Number	1879	1117	399	162	11	3568
%	53	31	11	5	<1	100

Concluding Reflections

- Many Americans love guns. Love by its nature transcends logic. The irrational is rationalised, and the preposterous is defended.
- Passionate love affairs are often dangerous for the lovers. Unfortunately, the costs of this affair will continue to be borne in part by third parties – the unlucky innocents who happen to be the target of the next undisciplined shooter.
- There is no sign at Federal level that George Washington's requirement for discipline to accompany the right to bear arms has been or is being taken on board at policy level. Until the love affair palls, this requirement is unlikely to be addressed.
- If attention is to be devoted specifically to the 'shooting spree' class of killing, the focus should be on young Caucasian men. If access to dangerous weaponry by this group could be dramatically reduced, this would help.
- Samuel Johnson commented (unfairly) about Scottish Highlanders: “

The inhabitants were for a long time perhaps not unhappy, but their content was a muddy mixture of pride and ignorance, an indifference for pleasures which they did not know, a blind veneration for their chiefs, and a strong conviction of their own importance”.

- There are lessons to be learnt from other jurisdictions, but the muddy mixture of pride and ignorance that characterises much commentary makes learning difficult.
- One of the real successes of Irish freedom was the transition to peace from the guns and violence of the war of independence and civil war. An unarmed police force was established, and there was no infatuation by the public with gun ownership and all the rationalisations that it engenders. This was an important and enduring contribution to Ireland's social capital. But it is endangered by the inheritance of the Northern Troubles, where access to guns and a willingness to use them for some became the norm. For a few, killing for political reasons has morphed into murdering for profit, often linked to controlling the sale and distribution of drugs, and with guns as the essential enforcer.
- Aurora needs to highlight what it does well in the public interest, keep doing it, and tell the world that it refuses to be typecast by the horrors of July 20, 2012, which were not of its making.

Notes

Data on past shooting spree incidents are drawn from:

'US Shocked by cinema mass shooting' by Shannon Bond and James Politi, *Financial Times*, July 21, 22, 2012, p. 8

Data on international comparisons – see:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_firearm-related_death_rate

Data on the stock of guns held – see

:<http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/08/28/us-world-firearms-idUSL2834893820070828>

Data on conflict-related deaths in Northern Ireland taken from:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/jun/10/deaths-in-northern-ireland-conflict-data>

Data on gun violence in the US – see:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun_violence_in_the_United_States