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## We are not helpless to stop gun violence

After being told nothing can be done about gun violence, we have learned to be helpless. A group of community leaders tells how to break the cycle.

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Our nation is stuck right now, paralyzed by the marriage of learned helplessness and meaningless re-enactments.

After another bloody holiday weekend—[seven dead](#) and dozens wounded in Highland Park; [at least 10 dead](#) and 62 wounded in the city of Chicago; [more than 220 dead](#) and more wounded in other cities and counties—we are seeing these two trends converge again.

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The learned helplessness is expressed by all of the rationalizations for inaction that get repeated endlessly in the various news streams. We are told nothing can be done about gun violence because guns are transported from states with loose laws to states, like Illinois, with tough gun laws. We are told that Congress and many state legislators are useless because of the leverage of the gun lobby. We are told that we can't trace guns that show up at crime and massacre scenes, and we can't identify the young men who take their frustrations or fantasies out on shoppers, school children or parade goers. We have learned to be helpless in the face of all those "nothing can be done."

So we resort to re-enactments—religious, civic and communal expressions of faith or sympathy—that have become idols, as the late theologian Jaroslav Pelikan wrote. Idols are images or events that ask you to look at them, but not through them. They exist for themselves and themselves only, and have no other impact or resonance. We attend these events, but nothing happens afterward, except the waiting that takes place before the next shooting occurs, and the cycle starts over again.

We are writing not as pessimists or cynics, but as realists and pragmatists. Instead of learned helplessness and meaningless reenactments, here is what can be done:

- The U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms & Explosives and local law enforcement agencies can track every single gun that shows up at a crime scene and identify the dealers who sold that gun to those killers. In fact, we used this strategy effectively 15 years ago in the Chicago area and found that just two dealers were the go-to sellers to a large percentage of criminals. Once identified, those dealers should be held accountable—forced to be more careful about whom they sell to and shut down if they refuse.
- The federal government, military services and law enforcement agencies should use their purchasing power—40% of the market—to demand that gun manufacturers cut all ties to irresponsible gun dealers and integrate gun safety technology into all future weapons. This would make it impossible for a stolen gun to be used by a thief. It would eliminate the accidental deaths that occur when children find and fire a parent's gun. And it would make it useless if a criminal wrested a gun from an arresting officer. There's nothing stopping government purchasers from acting now. In addition, government purchasers could insist that manufacturers only sell assault-style weapons to bona fide law enforcement agencies, not to the general public, or else lose their large lucrative government contracts.
- Technologists should stop creating scams like crypto and design apps that identify and trace any video, tweet, message or other communication that includes scenes of violence, mayhem or murder. Those who send these messages are signaling their intent to do harm, the Highland Park accused shooter being the latest in a long line of these individuals. It's time to take those messages seriously. And it's time to intervene early and proactively with both mental health and criminal justice professionals when a young would-be killer starts to broadcast his intentions.
- Police departments should concentrate on the very small portions of a city or county where most of the daily and weekly shooting and killing occurs. The only way to disrupt

this pattern is to do what the New York Police Department did when leaders like Bill Bratton, Jack Maple and John Timoney introduced and applied the **CompStat** approach to communities that were considered beyond repair. This required relentless leadership from the top and high standards for professional, accountable and respectful policing on the ground. We were in those neighborhoods when this transformation occurred, and in fact had been calling for many of the approaches the NYPD implemented, so we know it works. We also know that those on the right will reject this because they read "accountable" and "respectful" as too soft. And those on the left will reject this because many in that camp don't believe any level of policing is warranted. Let them both stew in their own ideological juices. There is simply no substitute for professional, accountable and respectful policing, concentrated in those communities currently being decimated by murder and mayhem.

- Finally, a proven way to reduce gun violence and crime of all kinds is to rebuild the abandoned buildings and often-vacant acres of some of our most distressed communities. Where we have built critical masses of thousands of new affordable homes and apartments in East Brooklyn and hundreds of renovated homes and apartments on the Southwest Side of Chicago, crime has plummeted. It should come as no surprise that quality, safe and affordable housing, along with the relationships created by consistent organizing that addresses other issues, stops and reverses the chain reaction of decline, crime and hopelessness and triggers a new chain reaction of better health, better educational outcomes and equity generation.

All of these approaches depend on one thing: leadership—fearless, consistent, steady, unwavering.

We must unlearn helplessness and learn effectiveness. We must stop the re-enactments and engage in purposeful, incremental, long-term, meaningful action.

*The Rev. David Brawley is the co-chair of **East Brooklyn Congregations** and **Metro Industrial Areas Foundation**, a Jamaica, N.Y.-based network of citizens organizations. Amy Totsch is the lead organizer of **United Power for Action & Justice** in Chicago. Richard Townsell is the head of the **Lawndale Christian Development Corp.** and a co-chair of **United Power for Action and Justice**. Michael Gecan is senior adviser to Metro IAF.*

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