

## **Opinion Editorial**

**Chief Larry J. Todd, Immediate Past President  
California Police Chiefs Association**

**Chief Salvatore V. Rosano, Chair  
Firearms Regulation Committee**

On February 2, 1995, the California Police Chiefs Association adopted a position paper concerning the need to address firearm violence, death, and injury. This document, titled "Confronting The American Tragedy - The Need To Better Regulate Firearms," was the culmination of a year long study by Chiefs of Police from throughout the state - from rural communities to urban cities, from large and small agencies, and from very high crime jurisdictions to low crime areas. The one thing they all had in common was citizens with an ever increasing fear of crime, especially violent crime involving firearms.

As Chiefs of Police, we are responsible for public safety. That responsibility requires leadership. It is for these reasons we have chosen to step forward into what will undoubtedly be perceived by some to be a political hornet's nest. But maybe that's been the problem. For far too long, the political winds have been reacting to a strong gun lobby instead of the overwhelming number of honest, law-abiding citizens who want laws that make sense rather than laws that favor special interest groups.

Just as the widespread possession of firearms is an American fact, so too is the widespread tragedy that has accompanied the misuse of firearms. A brief look at the

statistics of gun violence should convince even the most dispassionate observer that firearms are taking an unacceptable toll in our communities.

Let's look at a few of the chilling facts:

- How do we compare to other countries? In 1992, handguns were used in the murders of 33 people in Britain, 36 in Sweden, 87 in Switzerland, 128 in Canada, 13 in Australia, 60 in Japan, and 13,220 in the United States.
- In 1993, 40,230 Americans were killed by firearms in homicides, suicides, and accidents.
- For the first time since the gangster days of the 1930's, more people were killed in 1994 with firearms than in automobile accidents.
- It is conservatively estimated that for every person killed by a firearm at least ten more are shot yet survive. That equates to over 400,000 shooting victims each year.
- The economic impact of this (medical, insurance, and lost work) is enormous. It is estimated that the medical costs alone average over \$8,000 per victim. According to the Center For Disease Control, the medical costs combined with the time lost from work cost Americans 14.4 billion dollars in 1994.

- In the four year period 1990-1993, there were more murders in the U.S. (59,086) than total deaths (46,163) in the entire nine years of the Vietnam War (1965-1973). Where are all the protesters and Washington D.C. marchers on these undeclared "crime war" deaths?

- It's a felony to possess certain knives, brass knuckles, a billy club, or a throwing star. Yet we have historically treated the possession of an unlawfully concealed firearm as a citable misdemeanor. As a result, gang members and other serious felons face far less legal sanctions if caught with a 9mm automatic in the waistband than if caught with a dagger in a pocket.

- In California alone, over 100,000 firearms are stolen each year. The vast majority are not registered. Well intentioned citizens who fail to properly secure their firearms are contributing to the problem. As a result, when law enforcement personnel come across these weapons, we are unable to determine if they are stolen and unable to return them to the legitimate owners. Criminals in possession of these stolen firearms go unprosecuted and victims rarely see their property returned. If the average value of these stolen firearms is \$200, law-abiding citizens suffer an annual loss of over \$20,000,000. In the same way that automobiles require registration, firearm registration would result in no significant burden upon lawful owners.

- There are product safety standards for virtually everything from toasters to baby rattles. Yet none for the one device that is designed to kill - firearms! We design cars with keys,

elaborate combination locking systems and alarms with sirens, honking horns and flashing lights to alert us if someone even comes close to our cars. It makes more sense to require the same level of product safety for firearms as we require of a baby rattle, and storage and locking efforts, as we place on protecting our cars.

- Just as we limit the age of driving and drinking of alcohol, it makes sense to limit the age for firearm ownership. In 1991, as an example, nationwide there were 3,247 children and teenagers under the age of 18 murdered with firearms, 1,436 committed suicide with firearms, and 551 died in unintentional shootings.

Furthermore, while people are needlessly being shot, the sales of firearms soar to record levels. During 1993, Californians purchased approximately 650,000 firearms, and in 1994, almost as many have been sold. These numbers reflect the real fear and hopelessness many citizens feel as heinous acts of violence increasingly take a toll on society. We must address this environment of fear if we are to rein in what appears to be a ceaseless appetite for more and more guns. The premise that more guns in the hands of the civilian population makes for a safer environment certainly appears not to be the case.

Most of the current debate about firearms violence focuses on criminal misconduct. We believe that present statutes prohibiting the use of firearms in the commission of any crime must be enforced strongly and swiftly. To do otherwise is unconscionable. However, we cannot escape the fact that many of the firearms-related deaths and injuries occur not as

a result of intentional criminal misconduct but because of accident, mistake, and misfortune. Far too often firearm violence occurs between family, friends, unintended victims, and children; people whose lives are forever changed because a firearm was too readily available.

After long and thoughtful deliberation, the California Police Chiefs Association has concluded that the widespread and still largely unregulated individual ownership of firearms in our society must be re-evaluated. It is abundantly clear that the communities in which we are privileged to serve are under attack by a type and extent of violence not previously experienced. The weapons of that violence increasingly are firearms; firearms in the hands of drug dealers, robbers, mental incompetents, and in many cases, otherwise law-abiding citizens who are untrained or emotionally ill-equipped to safely use a firearm. As a result, the widespread and ready availability of firearms threatens to undermine the foundation of our social order.

The California Police Chiefs Association recognizes its responsibility to provide decisive and common-sense leadership necessary to help address this critically important and emotionally charged issue. The lack of regulation over, and the misuse of, firearms is one of the most daunting issues we must face if we are ever to address the tragedy that threatens the viability of our society. For far too long, the law enforcement community has stood silent permitting other voices to speak for us. As a consequence, the misuse of firearms has been focused upon solely as a crime problem rather than as a social crisis

that threatens us all.

The California Police Chiefs Association states as an unequivocal goal the saving of human lives through the substantive reduction in the misuse of firearms. We recognize the reality that large numbers of firearms will be a part of our lives for many years to come. We therefore believe that it is incumbent upon our association to articulate and support an agenda for action that will reduce the opportunity for firearms to kill and injure innocent people.

The National Rifle Association and other groups will argue that "guns don't kill, people do." And, they will state that we are trying to confiscate firearms from law abiding citizens. Nothing is further from the truth. Aside from our long standing position on banning assault weapons from our society, nothing we have proposed would take firearms away from responsible citizens. Our proposal simply attempts to deal with firearms in the same rational way we do with other products and behaviors. If we are concerned enough to license drivers, register automobiles, regulate drinking and driving, and create product safety standards for toasters and baby rattles, then we ought to at least be willing to do the same to the one product designed to kill - firearms!