News

Baltimore City Police collected more than 300 guns during a gun buyback and resource event Aug. 5 at the Edmondson Village Shopping Center in West Baltimore. (OSV News/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)

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Gun violence in the United States has reached crisis levels, a prominent activist said, but there is hope.

Shane Claiborne, a speaker, author and co-founder of the Red Letter Christians nonprofit in Philadelphia, told webinar participants Nov. 8 that about 120 lives are lost to guns every day in America, amounting to more deaths than all the casualties of all of America's wars. Gun violence is now the No. 1 cause of death in youth, he said.

"That's why we often say you can't be pro-life and ignore gun violence," Claiborne said. "Those of us who care about gun violence have got to get as organized as those who have been champions for guns."

The webinar was hosted by Nuns Against Gun Violence, an advocacy and education coalition formed in April, which calls for "common sense, evidence-based, gun violence prevention," and has more than 50 congregations of women religious as members.

Claiborne's group chops up guns and makes tools or mementos out of them, such as a cross that was given to Pope Francis.

"Metal that's been crafted to kill can be re-crafted. It's very holy work. It's sacramental," he said. "It's hopeful. It's saying we believe things can be different."

Activist Shane Claiborne (second row, holding book) speaks during a Nov. 8 webinar hosted by Nuns Against Gun Violence. (GSR screenshot/Nuns Against Gun Violence)

Claiborne said the fight over access to guns has been dominated by a few extremists, while up to 90% of Americans and up to 70% of gun owners want common sense regulations.

"When people say to me this is not a gun problem, it is a heart problem or a sin problem, I say it can be both. Every country in the world has the heart problem and the sin problem," he said, but what is unique in the United States is an almost unfettered access to weapons. "The vast majority of gun owners want to see gun law changes."

And there is a spiritual aspect to the problem, as well, Claiborne said.

"The largest group of gun owners in the United States is Christians. Particularly evangelicals, but across the board Christians own more guns than any other group," he said. "But the cross and the gun give us two very different visions of power: One says I am willing to die, the other says I am willing to kill. It is impossible to love our enemies and at the same time prepare to kill them."

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The United States' population makes up less than 5% of the world's 8 billion people, but Americans own almost half of the world's civilian-owned guns. The problem has become so acute, Claiborne said, gun ownership has become a form of idolatry.

"Idols are things that we die for, kill for, and sacrifice our children for, and guns have certainly become idols in America," he said. "We give them a sort of sacred reverence that only belongs to God."

But there is hope, Claiborne says. Two-thirds of Americans do not own firearms, and even among those that do, the majority favor common sense policies such as universal background checks or a limit on the number of rounds a gun can hold before it must be reloaded.

Rather, the problem is extremist groups like the National Rifle Association, which has become one of the biggest and most powerful lobbying groups in the country. But even that is an outsized voice, Claiborne said, because if the NRA's claim of 5 million members is true, that means more than 90% of gun owners are not part of the organization.

"The gun lobby has been very effective in preventing research and public knowledge of irresponsible gun shops and the people who are profiting off the loss of life," he said. "It's similar to how tobacco companies didn't want anyone to know cigarettes cause cancer."

Claiborne said it should not be impossible to enact reasonable limits such as red flag laws that allow police to take the guns of those who are mentally ill or dangerous, or raising the age limit to buy weapons — "if you're too young to buy a beer, you're too young to buy a gun," he said.

And gun control is not a new idea.

"Some of the first gun control laws were passed to try to keep Native Americans and African Americans from getting guns," he said. "So white folks really believed in gun control when it came to keeping non-white people from acquiring weapons."

After Claiborne finished, participants heard from Sr. Patricia Millen, a Sister of St. Francis of Philadelphia, on how her congregation adopted a corporate stance on guns, and Sr. Annette McDermott, a Sister of St. Joseph of Springfield, Massachusetts

, on how her congregation reached out to the community after a man in mental distress opened fire on a family and then killed himself.