When will America wake up to gun violence?

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(CNN) -- Last night's shooting rampage at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, was a nightmare. Authorities have already arrested a suspect. Four weapons were recovered in the shooting scene, including a shotgun and two handguns. Twelve people have been killed, with many more injured. According to law enforcement officials, the weapons were purchased legally by the suspect in the last six months.

The shooting was senseless. And it makes us think once again about how we can address the horrific problem of gun violence in America.

The first task is conceptual -- can we figure out what will work? The second task is political -- can plausible solutions be implemented legislatively?

Opinion: Gun control won't stop mass murder

The conceptual problem is immensely difficult, especially in a society that is already as gun-saturated as America is today. The political problem borders on the impossible. Gun policy in this country is made by the National Rifle Association, and no serious effort at gun control can currently get past its veto.

Even when legislation passed during the Clinton years in the form of the Brady bill, requiring background checks at the time of gun purchases, or the assault weapons ban, the NRA succeeded in injecting gaping loopholes into the laws.

Who needs to go through a background check at Walmart when you can get your gun without one at the local gun show or from some shady figure on a street corner?

The assault weapon ban only prohibited the manufacture of new guns (it grandfathered in a huge cache of pre-existing weapons) and gun manufacturers easily redesigned their guns to circumvent the ban. The NRA then trumpets how "gun control" doesn't work.

But it can.

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Consider what happened in Australia after a crazed gunman killed 35 people in Port Arthur, Tasmania, in 1996.

The Australian federal government persuaded all states and territories to implement tough new gun control laws. Under the National Firearms Agreement (NFA), firearms legislation was tightened throughout the country. National registration of guns was
imposed and it became illegal to hold certain long guns that might be used in mass shootings.

The gun ban was backed up by a mandatory buy-back program that substantially reduced gun possession in Australia.

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The effect was that both gun suicides and homicides (as well as total suicides and homicides) fell. Importantly, while there were 13 mass shootings in Australia during the period of 1979--96, there have been none in the sixteen years since.

In 1996, then-Prime Minister John Howard stated that the "whole scheme is designed to reduce the number of guns in the community and make Australia a safer place to live." The Australian attorney general praised the cooperation and responsibility of Australian firearms owners with the gun controls and buy-back, saying, "they have been paid cash for their firearms - giving our nation a welcome Christmas gift by removing unnecessary high-powered firearms from the community. It offers all of us the real chance of a safer festive season and New Year."

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Of course, the Australian gun control law in 1997 enjoyed an extremely high level of public support and was not hampered by any domestic gun industry (since Australia did not have any).

Such would not be the case in the United States where pro-gun political views and NRA power create a very different climate. In the wake of another tragic massacre of innocent lives, we should look carefully at the Australian experience to see if the American public will ever rise up as one against gun violence.

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