

Laws Are No Substitute to Vigilance

By **Greg Ridgeway**

This commentary appeared in the *Washingtonpost.com* on April 18, 2007.

The shootings at Virginia Tech have prompted a discussion of America's gun laws. But while Virginia's gun laws have been criticized by some as being lax, even the toughest gun restrictions in effect anywhere in the United States — such as those in California and Massachusetts — likely could not have prevented this tragedy.

Research at the RAND Corporation and elsewhere indicates that some gun restrictions can reduce gun violence.

Background checks will prevent criminals, those with restraining orders, and the mentally ill from acquiring guns from legal sources. Waiting periods and safety classes might prevent an impulsive crime from occurring. But the patient, plotting person with no criminal record — like Virginia Tech gunman Cho Seung Hui — will have no problem buying a gun legally anywhere in America, just as Cho did in Virginia.

Gun control laws can be also immensely useful for educating gun buyers about safe storage and handling of firearms, for preventing guns from ending up in the hands of a felon, and for solving gun crimes.

But a handgun ban in the District of Columbia — similar to those in force in England and Japan — was recently struck down by a federal appeals court as unconstitutional. If upheld by the Supreme Court this would ensure that neither states nor the federal government could impose a similar ban.

Certainly, gun laws need a close look in the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings. But laws are no substitute to vigilance by all of us to look for warning signs that indicate someone may resort to deadly violence.

Greg Ridgeway is associate director of the Safety and Justice program at the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit research organization.