

# Moore's film targets home state

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## Moore's film targets home state

By Daniel Sturm

"I grew up in Michigan. A gun lover's paradise."

This is the opening sentence of Michael Moore's new film, "Bowling for Columbine," which opened at Celebration! Cinema Friday. The Dog Eat Dog production questions why gun violence is a major issue in the country and in Moore's home state.

Actor Charlton Heston, president of the National Rifle Association, was born in Michigan, so was James Nichols, brother of the Oklahoma City bombing's co-conspirator, Terry Nichols. Before the bombings, Terry Nichols and Timothy McVeigh spent at least three months at the Nichols' tofu-farm, where they were suspected of making practice bombs and where they trained with the Michigan Militia. Moore traces their footsteps, interviewing militia gunmen and spending a strange evening with the unconvicted brother, James. The filmmaker then takes us on a trip to the Kmart headquarters in Troy, with two students who were injured during the 1999 Columbine High School massacre. After showing management the scars left from Kmart bullets still imbedded in their bodies, the teen-agers convinced the chain store's management to stop selling ammunition.

Carolynne Jarvis, executive director of Michigan Partnership to Prevent Gun Violence, which assisted Moore with research, agreed with the Flint-born film director's assessment that Michigan residents had an especially strong relationship to guns. "Michigan has a major role in the tragedy of gun violence, injuries and deaths sweeping the nation," she said. The anti-gun group's statistics showed that in 2000, there were 1,060 gun deaths in Michigan, including 505 homicides, 519 suicides, and 16 firearm accidents. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Michigan's firearm homicide rate ranks 13th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia.

African Americans in Michigan are particularly at risk: Between 1996 and 1998 Michigan ranked fifth in black homicide rates (white people in the state ranked 34th), with 41 in 100,000 people being shot. The national average is 28. Generally, there's a higher likelihood for young males in Michigan of being killed by

a gun. Males aged 20-24 had a rate of 40 per 100,000, which was significantly higher than the nationwide rate (31 homicides). Within the same age group, African-Americans are particularly at risk in Michigan. With a rate of 221 firearm homicides in 100,000, they are over-represented by 55 percent, compared to the national rate of 143. Although black males between the ages of 14 and 34 make up roughly 2 percent of the state's population, they accounted for close to 50 percent of gun homicide victims in 2000. African-American males aged 14 to 19 are 40 times more likely to be murdered by firearms than white males in Michigan of the same ages.

Jarvis points out that video clips of shootings are a favorite theme for the media, and this gives a distorted image of reality. "Most people are so used to guns being part of everyday life that they don't see them as a problem ... that has a solution."

Moore's theory in "Bowling for Columbine" is that Americans live excessively in fear and that corporations selling security devices and bullets are among the biggest beneficiaries of this climate. He re-creates the day when two Columbine High School students killed 12 of their classmates. That same day, U.S. bombers had dropped more bombs on Kosovo than at any other time during that war, hitting a hospital and an elementary school. But instead of blaming the presence of war as a possible factor in instilling violence in young people, Moore says concerned conservatives scapegoated the rock singer Marilyn Manson, an idol of the two teen-age shooters. In the film, Manson defended himself against the allegations of having inspired violence through his "shock rock" music. "They forgot that the president was shooting bombs overseas, and yet I was the bad guy. It's a campaign based on a simple idea: Keep everybody afraid and they'll consume."

The reasons for gun violence are complex and apparently deep-rooted. With an average of roughly 11,127 people killed by guns each year (not including 16,418 gun-related suicides), the United States has a frightening record. The anti-gun group statistics illustrated that in Japan the risk of getting killed by a gun is 208 times lower. In England/Wales you are 90 times less likely to be involved in a firearms homicide, in Germany 30 times less often, in Australia 15 times, and in France it is at least 11 times less likely. In a recent study the organization compared gun violence in the United States with epidemics such as polio and AIDS, finding that AIDS claimed close to 450,000 lives between 1979 and 1998 and firearms roughly 690,000.

Americans have three times more guns than Canadians per capita, yet in the United States the related death rate is four times higher. How do experts explain this discrepancy in those rates? Jarvis says that in Canada one in 30 citizens has a gun, compared to one in nine citizens in the U.S., meaning that there are more than three times as many guns per capita in the United States. "Canada has always had stronger firearms regulations than the United States," she asserts. Handguns there have been licensed and registered since the 1930s, and ownership has been restricted to police, members of gun clubs, and collectors. As a result, Canada has roughly 1 million handguns, whereas the United States has more than 76 million. The researchers concluded that where high levels of gun ownership exist, such as in the U.S.A., the former Yugoslavia, South Africa and in several countries in Latin America, higher levels of violence exist as well.

The Michigan Partnership to Prevent Gun Violence is exploring several last-resort tactics in a seemingly impossible battle to improve gun control. There is the option, for instance, of a legal claim that would make the firearm industry accountable for the costs incurred from gun violence. In October 1998, New Orleans became the first city to file a lawsuit against the firearms industry. Since then, more than 30 lobby organizations have brought similar cases to court. As a result of growing pressure in March 2000 the nation's largest gun manufacturer, Smith and Wesson, agreed to impose stricter controls on its distribution channels and to integrate safer technology. In Michigan, both Wayne County and Detroit have unsuccessfully filed

lawsuits against the gun industry, alleging that it has been engaged in negligent distribution practices.

Despite these limitations, according to the anti-gun group, licensing and registration works better in Michigan. Everybody who wants to buy a handgun is required to obtain a license, and to present the pistol to the police for a safety inspection, says Jarvis. Yet she criticizes that law enforcement doesn't necessarily always follow-up when the prospective purchaser fails to return for the safety inspection. In addition, just recently the Bush administration cut funding for the so-called Buy Back America Program, established by former U.S. President Bill Clinton to let gun owners sell unwanted firearms to law enforcement, no questions asked. Over the first few months of the program, 20,000 firearms were collected. The Michigan cities Detroit, River Rouge, Saginaw, Inkster and Flint became part of the program.

Every year thousands of guns disappear from the radar of federal surveillance. The Michigan Partnership to Prevent Gun Violence and other gun-control groups lobby to establish trafficking patterns. "Right now we're talking with legislatures about requiring that every gun retrieved during crime investigations be traced," says Jarvis. Thus the crime investigators might find out that a significant number of guns they trace come from a certain gun store, or a certain person, for instance. The anti-gun group lobbies for implementing a permanent Task Force in the Attorney General's office to monitor gun trafficking patterns and to close down the less than 10 percent of licensed firearms dealers. But gun control still has a long way to go, because the National Rifle Association consistently lobbies to lower the budget of the federal firearm inspectors. "That has created problems in terms of national enforcement," says Jarvis. According to federal law the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms is only allowed to visit a dealer once a year. In Michigan there are 3,337 federally licensed gun dealers.

Another factor in gun violence is poverty, says Jarvis. Wayne County is the county with the highest firearm death rate in the state, with 29.62 fatal shootings per 100,000 residents. Saginaw follows with 15.18, and Ingham County has 9.13. Although Ingham County has 75,000 more residents than Saginaw County, between 1988 and 1997 61 fewer people died from gun-related suicide (178), homicide (69), or accident (11). Jarvis said that Wayne County and Saginaw County were major industrial centers with much higher degree of urban poverty, which explained the huge statistical difference. She said nationwide trends show that in places with higher poverty, higher levels of gun violence exist. "In comparison to Wayne and Saginaw, Ingham County is not as industrial. It doesn't have the same concentration of population, and it doesn't have the same level of poverty."

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