

Health Policy Brief

To: Nicole Malliotakis

From: Andres Hernandez

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Re: Improving Public Safety by Reducing Gun Violence

Statement of Issue: What strategy should be adopted to effectively address gun violence and enhance public safety?

In 2020, more than 45,000 Americans were killed in acts of gun violence.¹ One in five individuals say they have personally been threatened with a gun, and a similar number report that a family member was killed by a gun.² From that same survey, it was determined that gun violence disproportionately affects people of color, with one-third of black adults having a family member who was killed by a gun, twice the rate of white adults. Gun homicides and shootings have also had a disproportionate impact on American cities. An analysis from 2015 showed that 53% of all gun homicides took place in just 127 U.S. cities, mostly in racially segregated and poor neighborhoods.³ Given the increasing prevalence of gun violence in the United States, stricter initiatives that go into action are needed to reduce gun violence, or else we should expect this detrimental trend to continue affecting public safety.

American civilians own nearly 50% of the entire world's privately owned firearms according to the Small Arms Survey.⁴ From the same survey in 2018, American civilians owned about 363 million guns which is about six times more than any other country. With 120.5 guns owned per 100 residents, the United States not only has the highest number of guns in the world, but also surpasses the country's population.

There has been little success at the federal level in passing policies that restrict gun access or usage. Such measures have failed to pass both the House of Representatives and the Senate. In 2019, the Democratic House introduced background check legislation, which became the first major gun bill to pass the House in 25 years.⁵ However, obtaining Senate approval has proven to be very difficult.

More laws have been approved at the state level, primarily focused on expanding rather than limiting access to guns. Since 2012, all 50 states and Washington D.C. have enacted approximately 600 laws.⁶ However, it's worth noting that 60% of these laws were supported by the National Rifle Association (NRA) and aimed at increasing the use of guns.

The gun industry possesses a powerful interest group with strong incentives to sell firearms. Despite the lockdowns implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has deemed firearms businesses as essential, allowing them to continue operating.⁷

Policy Options:

- Despite reluctance at the federal level, it is undeniable that federal support is needed to reduce gun violence. Without such support, enacting meaningful change will be challenging. Current federal and state gun laws have too many loopholes that make it too easy to obtain firearms. Stricter firearm legislation is needed, which involves strengthening background checks and implementing permit-to-purchase laws at the national level, to address firearm violence.⁸
 - **Advantages:** States with stronger gun policies have lower homicide rates, even when adjusting for demographical and sociological factors.⁸ However, the impact of stricter laws in those states is limited if surrounded by states with weaker laws, as individuals can easily bring firearms illegally across state borders. States with stronger firearm laws can't reach their full potential by themselves, which highlights the importance of federal support. National laws would have a greater impact on reducing gun violence than solely maintaining policies at the state level.
 - **Disadvantages:** While strong federal laws would strengthen the states and help prevent the smuggling of illegal guns, it is important to note that people may still find ways to obtain guns illegally. Most firearms collected from gangs or criminals were obtained illegally, with the original purchaser often not being the one in possession of the firearm.⁹ These firearms are likely sourced from states with weaker firearm laws.
- Another option to reduce gun violence is through the promotion of gun buyback programs. On April 29, 2023, the New York Attorney General, Letitia James, hosted the state's first buyback program.¹⁰ In this program, individuals were able to turn in their firearms without any questions asked, the need for identification, and without collecting any information, in exchange for gift cards worth up to \$500.
 - **Advantages:** The incentive here is to encourage people to turn in their guns and effectively remove firearms from the streets in exchange for compensation. These gun buyback programs often receive limited national attention but can be implemented without the need for approval from lawmakers, who are often divided on issues related to gun initiatives.
 - **Disadvantages:** These programs are entirely voluntary, and their effectiveness depends on whether individuals considering participation find the offered reward sufficient to justify giving up their firearm. Although these programs may remove firearms from the street, limited research has been conducted to determine their effectiveness in reducing violence due to the challenges associated with studying such programs.¹⁰ For instance, while a person may give up one firearm, it is difficult to determine whether that same individual has other guns at their disposal for potential use. Additionally, these programs also accept inoperable guns, meaning firearms that are unlikely to contribute to acts of violence.¹⁰
- The next option for reducing gun violence is to focus on the communities most affected by gun violence and address the root causes through the implementation of intervention programs. By adopting this approach, the emphasis will be on strengthening the community by providing necessary resources to address the underlying causes of crime before they escalate into violence.
 - **Advantages:** By addressing community issues, we can work towards improving factors that contribute to crime, such as low socioeconomic status, unemployment,

- and poor mental health. It is estimated that approximately 20% of police calls are related to mental health and substance abuse, which are often correlated with violent crime.¹¹
- ***Disadvantages:*** Implementing this bottom-up approach requires various resources, time, and funding. However, it is preferable to simply providing increased funding to the police, as that may contribute to mass incarceration, further exacerbating the disproportionate impact on communities already affected by gun violence.¹¹ Increasing law enforcement without addressing underlying issues within the community can lead to increased resentment and decreased trust in police, potentially resulting in more violence, which goes against our goal of reducing it.

Policy Recommendation:

Gun violence is a pressing public health issue in America, underscored by the alarming increase in firearm-related deaths across the United States. Ensuring public safety requires the implementation of stricter federal laws, including enhanced background checks and permit-to-purchase regulations at the national level. The influence of the gun industry and NRA have led to numerous state laws that favor firearm sales rather than limiting access to guns. Easy access to firearms is causing significant harm to the American population affecting not only individuals but also families and communities at large. It is crucial for politicians to prioritize the well-being of their fellow citizens over financial interests. Collaboration among politicians is essential to transcend the influence of monetary concerns, which is needed to address the issue at hand. While recent success at the congressional level in approving federal background checks indicates progress, the Senate's agreement is equally vital. Strengthening federal gun policies will undeniably have a positive impact on reducing gun violence, as demonstrated by states with stricter laws experiencing lower rates of firearm-related incidents. Moreover, federal laws can provide much needed support to states with stricter gun policies, especially those situated alongside states with weaker regulations, as those are more susceptible to illegal transport of firearms through state lines. Although enacting federal laws will be an uphill battle due to past challenges and contextual factors influencing politicians, it remains the most effective approach to address gun violence nationally. Prioritizing the safety and well-being of Americans must guide this process, leading to a more secure and protected society for everyone.

Sources:

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