

# Gun Safety: Prevention of Gun Violence

POSITION STATEMENT | February 2023



## OUR POSITION

Public Health Madison & Dane County supports the reduction of harm caused by firearms in our community. This can be achieved by the implementation of strategies that further our understanding of gun violence, reduce the ease of access to firearms by those individuals who seek to do harm, increase gun safety, support safe storage, and decrease the harm and destructiveness of firearms.

## INTRODUCTION

Violence is a public health crisis. Violence can take many different forms, from sexual violence, intimate-partner violence, violence within home settings, suicide, self-harm and gun violence. From suicides to homicides, accidental shooting injuries and mass shootings to domestic violence, gun violence of all forms is a leading cause of premature death in the United States. It touches all populations, regardless of income, race, or geography. Gun violence comes at great social and financial cost not only to those directly affected but also to the community at large. Beyond just those directly injured or killed by guns, each act of violence leaves behind trauma and suffering for the friends, family, and communities of those who have been harmed. Simply hearing the sound of gunshots ringing out in neighborhoods can be a traumatic experience for many.

Through our partnerships with community organizations, health care, law enforcement, schools, and many others, Public Health has seen, heard, and discussed at-length the negative impacts of gun violence on children, families, and the communities in which we reside.

### *The public health approach to violence prevention*

Violence in our communities is an issue that affects everyone. Addressing it will require strategies at the individual and population levels. This is a public health approach to violence prevention, and it entails:

- A data-driven orientation to understanding & addressing violence,
- Multi-sector collaboration that spans government, law enforcement, community, health care, business, and academic partners,
- An examination of root causes and underlying structural and systemic issues that contribute to violence,
- Addressing population-level challenges including environmental and social conditions, and
- Addressing the spectrum of violence prevention through strategies that take into account the multiple determinants of community health and can be used to develop a comprehensive approach to current public health issues.

Within this framework, we believe that policies to improve gun safety are instrumental to violence prevention efforts. These policies can help improve firearm morbidity and mortality rates, and reduce disparities by protecting those at greatest risk of gun violence. While gun safety is one aspect of Public

Health's work in violence prevention, gun safety efforts are not intended to inhibit responsible gun ownership. These gun safety strategies supplement ongoing firearm policy reform efforts and increase understanding around gun safety policy. We acknowledge that violence prevention actions do not just sit in public health, but our work in this area can help to create a pathway for ongoing prevention and intervention efforts.

## BACKGROUND

In 2020, the most recent year for which complete data is available, 45,222 people died from firearm-related injuries in the U.S., for a rate of 13.7 firearm deaths per 100,000 population. This is the highest rate of firearm deaths recorded since 1994. This rate is increasing rapidly: by 13% from 2019, by 21% from 2015, and by 33% from 2010.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, firearm-related injuries surpassed motor vehicle crashes as the leading cause of death among children and adolescents in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

### Gun violence is not experienced equally

The burden of firearm violence, particularly homicide and suicide, is not experienced equally among all groups. The firearm homicide rate in the U.S. increased by 35% from 2019 to 2020. In 2020, the Black population had the highest firearm homicide rate and saw the largest increase in rates (39%). While the total firearm suicide rate was stable, American Indian and Alaska Native populations had a 42% increase in firearm suicides, surpassing the white population for the highest firearm suicide rate in the nation in 2020. Counties with the highest poverty levels had firearm homicide rates 4.5 times as high and firearm suicide rates 1.3 times as high as counties with the lowest poverty levels.<sup>3</sup>

While gun violence is not unique to the United States, the U.S. is an outlier for firearm death rates when compared to our peers. In 2019, the U.S. had the highest rate of firearm homicides among high-income countries with populations of 10 million or more. This was more than twice the rate of second-place Chile, more than 8 times higher than Canada, nearly 23 times higher than Australia, and over 206 times higher than Japan.<sup>4</sup> While mass shootings often generate the most headlines and attention in the U.S., suicides and non-mass shooting homicides account for a majority of these fatal firearm-related incidents.

### Gun violence in Dane County and Wisconsin

On average, one person in Dane County died every eight days from a firearm in 2021. These are preventable deaths that not only impact those directly involved, but also contribute to longstanding ripple effects for neighborhoods, schools, and the larger community.

The burden of firearm deaths are felt inequitably in our community. Firearms were the leading cause of death among non-Hispanic Black males ages 15-34 in Dane County from 2016-2021. Males in Dane County were 2.5 times more likely to die by firearm homicide & 13.2 times more likely to die by firearm suicide than females from 2016-2021.

Suicides account for the majority of gun deaths nationally, statewide, and locally. Seventy-seven percent of firearm deaths among people who live in Dane County from 2016-2021 were suicides, and 44% of all suicides involved a firearm. Twenty-three percent of youth under the age of 18 who died by suicide in

Dane County from 2005-2020 used a firearm. Firearm suicide rates are especially high among older white, non-Hispanic males.

While homicides consistently make the news, they account for a minority of fatalities. Twenty-two percent of firearm deaths among people who live in Dane County from 2016-2021 were homicides, and Two-thirds (67%) of homicides involved firearms. In 2021, there were 14 firearm homicides among people who live in Dane County, the highest since 2003. Black people who live in Dane County are the most impacted by firearm homicide: Black, non-Hispanic males had an age-adjusted firearm homicide rate of 20.8 per 100,000 from 2016-2021, which is 30 times as high as the rate for white, non-Hispanic males. Black, non-Hispanic females had a firearm homicide rate of 3.1 per 100,000, which is five times as high as the rate for white, non-Hispanic females.

### *Domestic violence*

Domestic violence impacts millions of Americans every year, and is a major cause of homicide among women. Women who experience domestic abuse are five times more likely to be killed by their abuser if the abuser has access to a firearm.<sup>8</sup> A recent study in California found that living with a handgun owner is associated with a substantially elevated risk for dying by homicide, and women are disproportionately affected.<sup>9</sup> In Wisconsin, firearms are the most common means of domestic violence homicides. In 2020, firearms were the weapons used in 52% of domestic violence homicide incidents, and at least nine of the 25 perpetrators were legally prohibited from having firearms.<sup>10</sup>

### *Unintentional shootings*

Ready access to guns also increases the likelihood that they will be used by accident. Nationally, unintentional shootings comprise 1.3% of gun deaths and 18% of gun injuries. The majority of these unintentional shootings involve people under the age of 24. In Wisconsin, there were 36 unintentional firearm deaths from 2016-2020, and 28% of those fatalities were children under the age of 18.

### *Mass shootings*

Mass shootings in the United States are on the rise. In 2021, there were 692 mass shootings events, a 13% increase from 610 events in 2020, and a 66% increase from 417 events in 2019.<sup>11</sup> While mass shootings still comprise a small fraction of overall gun deaths, they are a major part of the public consciousness around gun issues. Wisconsin has had three mass shootings in the past ten years: a white supremacist shot ten people (three fatally) at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek in 2012; an estranged husband shot seven people at a spa in Brookfield, killing three, including his ex-wife, in 2012. In Dane County, an employee shot four people at his Middleton workplace in 2018. In all three of these incidents, the perpetrator also died by firearm, either by shooting themselves or by being shot by police. Most recently, in 2022, after fleeing a 4<sup>th</sup> of July mass shooting in Highland Park, Illinois, the shooter ended up in Madison, Wisconsin. While the shooter ultimately did not commit another heinous act in Madison, there was a very real threat of violence that could have ended in a tremendous loss of life.

### *Gun violence creates human and economic costs*

Research in the area of brain science and development has identified adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress as strong predictors of negative health outcomes later in life. While ACEs are

defined as traumatic or stressful experiences at the individual level, community level factors, such as exposure to gun violence, also contribute to toxic stress.<sup>5</sup> Researchers recently found that medical spending increased by nearly \$2500 per month among survivors in the first year after a nonfatal firearm injury, and survivors also experienced an increase in pain diagnoses, psychiatric disorders, and substance use disorders. Family members of survivors also had an increase in psychiatric disorders.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the human toll of gun violence, the measurable economic costs, which include lost income and spending, employer costs, police and criminal justice responses, and health care treatment, affect the entire community financially. The United States Congress Joint Economic Committee estimates that gun violence imposes \$280 billion in total annual costs on the United States. According to the same report, the annual cost of gun violence in Wisconsin is \$3.8 billion.<sup>7</sup> We cannot afford to set gun safety aside in our communities.

### Recent legislation

In 2022, in response to several high-profile mass shooting events, the United States Congress passed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA). The BSCA is the most significant new federal legislation to address gun violence since the now-expired 10-year assault weapons ban of 1994. The BSCA includes funding for community-based violence prevention efforts, mental health services, increased school security, as well as funding for states to implement extreme risk protection orders. It also closes the “boyfriend loophole” in domestic violence cases, enhances background checks for people under 21, and requires gun sellers to register as Federally Licensed Firearm Dealers; they would then need to administer background checks before selling a gun. While these actions are historically significant in the fight against gun violence, there remain a number of areas of opportunity for further progress.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

We support the following strategies for reducing gun harm and increasing gun safety:

### Expand funding for gun violence research and data infrastructure

Funding for gun violence research in the U.S. has been largely nonexistent since 1996 when Congress enacted an amendment that forbade the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from spending money to “advocate or promote gun control.” In 2019, Congress reached a deal to restore some funding to gun violence research for the first time in nearly 25 years, and \$25 million was appropriated to the CDC and the National Institutes of Health. While some projects have been funded, there are many more potential programs and policies that deserve funding to implement and rigorously evaluate their effectiveness.

There also remains a lack of quality, timely data and data collection systems around firearm ownership, access, usage, and injury. The CDC’s National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) links detailed information from multiple sources on all firearm deaths, but only just recently expanded to all 50 states. Data quality is often not comprehensive or consistent across jurisdictions, and it is not nearly timely enough. As of mid-2022, the most recent NVDRS data available was from 2019. Expanding the collection

of data and research on gun violence would allow us to better understand the causes and develop appropriate solutions.

### Require universal background checks

Universal background checks help to close loopholes that allow firearms to get into the hands of people with violent criminal records and people prohibited from firearm ownership for mental health reasons. Properly enforced background checks keep guns out of the hands of people who might be a danger to themselves or others. In Wisconsin, firearms dealers must initiate the background check required by federal law by contacting the Wisconsin Department of Justice. Wisconsin does not require private sellers (sellers who are not licensed dealers) to initiate a background check when transferring a firearm. A Boston University School of Public Health study found that states with laws requiring universal background checks for all gun sales had homicide rates 15% lower than states without such laws.<sup>12</sup>

### Implement gun storage laws

Safe gun storage laws are intended to prevent unauthorized users, including children, from accessing and using firearms. These laws can reduce tragedies due to suicide, unintentional discharges, and gun theft. The state of Oregon enacted a safe storage law that requires the owner or possessor of a firearm to, at all times that the firearm is not carried by or under the control of the owner, possessor or authorized person, secure the firearm with an engaged trigger or cable lock in a locked container or in a gunroom. Safe gun storage practices can be financially incentivized by creating sales and use tax exemptions for sales of gun safes.<sup>13</sup> Having more guns stored safely and securely would reduce the amount of accidental deaths, suicides, and gun thefts in Dane County.

### Implement Extreme Risk Protection Order laws

Nineteen states and the District of Columbia have enacted Extreme Risk Protection Order laws (ERPOs, or red flag laws), which when properly implemented may help to prevent mass shootings, gun homicides, and suicides. ERPOs allow family members or law enforcement to petition a judge to temporarily disarm individuals that have made significant and credible threats of violence to themselves or others. Connecticut and Indiana's extreme risk laws have been shown to reduce firearm suicide rates in these states by 14% and 7.5%, respectively.<sup>14</sup>

### Raise the minimum age

Federal law requires that a purchaser be 21 to purchase a handgun. In Wisconsin, the minimum age to purchase a long gun such as a rifle or shotgun is 18. In the United States, we set minimum ages for driving, military service, and drinking alcohol. The parts of the brain responsible for impulse control, judgement, and long-range planning are among the last areas of the brain to fully mature, and in fact, may continue to develop until at least age 26.<sup>15</sup> Because young adults are at elevated risk of attempting suicide and engaging in violent behaviors, strengthening minimum age laws for purchasing and possessing guns will help protect young people and the public at large.

### Ban assault weapons and high capacity magazines

In 1994, Congress enacted a federal assault weapons ban as part of the *Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994*. In 2004, Congress allowed the ban to expire without renewing it. For the

decade that the federal assault weapons ban was in effect from 1994 to 2004, 89 people died in 12 mass shootings. In the decade after the ban expired from 2004 to 2014, over 300 people were shot and killed in 34 mass shootings. Wisconsin also has no law prohibiting the purchase of assault weapons. Assault weapons are designed to kill many people quickly. The mass shooters in Buffalo and Uvalde in 2022 used assault weapons in their attacks. The federal ban should be reinstated, and Wisconsin should institute its own ban.

Wisconsin has no laws prohibiting high capacity magazines on guns. High-capacity magazines are commonly defined as ammunition feeding devices capable of holding more than 10-rounds. High-capacity magazines can hold as many as 100-rounds, and standard high-capacity magazines hold 30-rounds. A ban on high capacity rounds would restrict a shooter's ability to fire for long periods without reloading and would keep the number of bullets per magazine to ten or fewer. Shootings involving high-capacity magazines have more fatalities and injuries than those that do not. In mass shootings between 2009 and 2020, high-capacity magazines led to five times as many people shot per mass shooting.<sup>16</sup>

### Institute waiting periods

In 2015, Wisconsin repealed its 48-hour waiting period requirement. The law stated that a federally licensed firearms dealer in Wisconsin could not transfer a handgun to any person until 48 hours after the dealer had been notified by the Wisconsin Department of Justice that the transfer did not violate state law. Waiting period laws have been proven to lower the rates of suicide. One study found that states with waiting period laws had 51% fewer firearm suicides than states without these laws. Another study showed that these states also experienced a 17% decrease in gun homicides. Based on this study, over 900 firearm homicides could be prevented each year if every state implemented waiting periods.<sup>17</sup>

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## APPROVAL

The Public Health Madison & Dane County Executive Team has reviewed this document and endorse it as an official position of Public Health Madison & Dane County:

Approval Date: 11/16/2022

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The Public Health Madison & Dane County Board of Health has reviewed this document and endorse it as an official position of Public Health Madison & Dane County:

Approval Date: 2/1/2023

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