

POSITION STATEMENT:

Strengthening Gun Safety Policies to Reduce Domestic Violence-Related Injuries and Deaths

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SUMMARY STATEMENT:

The Society of Behavioral Medicine supports stronger policies to enhance the safety of families and communities in the US through the implementation of stronger measures to prevent access to and use of firearms among individuals at risk for domestic or interpersonal violence.

THE PROBLEM:

Firearms are the leading cause of domestic violence (DV)-related homicide and homicide-suicide related deaths in the US.^[1] Histories of DV and access to firearms have been found to be significant risk factors of intimate partner homicides.^[2-3] Moreover, firearms are frequently used to control a partner, causing significant distress and anxiety.^[4] Access to a firearm is associated with a +500% risk of DV homicide in the US.^[5] In an analysis of fatal mass shootings from 2014-2019 in the US, 59.1% of the shootings were related to DV and in 68.2% of shootings, the perpetrator either killed at least one partner or a family member.^[6] Research shows that exposure to firearm violence (e.g., witnessing violence in the home) is also an adverse childhood experience with a range of negative health outcomes such as poor mental health.^[7]

Firearms-related deaths are also a significant source of mortality in the US, with firearm related injuries resulting in more than 30,000 deaths/year, including homicides and suicides.^[8] According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), 45,222 people died from firearm-related injuries in 2020, with 54% of firearm related deaths being suicides and 43% being murders. The remaining 3% firearm-related deaths were unintentional, involved law enforcement, or had undetermined circumstances. There were 513 mass shooting-related deaths in the US in 2020 (i.e., incidents where four or more people were shot). One essential strategy to prevent firearm related injuries and deaths in the United States is to implement policies that protect families and communities from immediate harm. For example, research has emphasized an empirical association between stricter gun policies and a reduction in gun-related death among women victims of abuse. Previously implemented state and local policies that prohibit abusers' access to firearms have resulted in 13-25% reductions in intimate partner homicide rates by a firearm.^[10,11]

CURRENT POLICIES:

- The recently passed Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (2022), includes guidelines for federal licenses to buy and sell firearms, imposes enhanced background check reviews of gun purchasers, reviews mental health records (age 16 and over), strengthens red-flag laws for officials to confiscate firearms from at-risk owners, and funds community violence intervention and prevention initiatives. Gaps include the need for the authorization of law enforcement, employers, co-workers, and school employees to file firearm restraining orders against individuals who may be at risk for self-harm or harm to others.
- Since 1968, domestic violence offenders, more recently including current or former spouses, individuals who have a child in common as a parent or guardian, or are current or former live-in partners, or are current or former dating partners, have long been prohibited from possessing firearms.^[12] Gaps include inconsistencies in the nature and enforcement of state and federal DV policies, the need for stalking offences to be upgraded from misdemeanors to felonies, and the banning of gun sales to perpetrators who have been issued temporary, as well as permanent, restraining orders.
- The Violence Against Women and Department of Justice Reauthorization Act (VAWA, 2005) requires states and local governments to notify DV offenders of the state and federal prohibitions mentioned above. However, this legislation did not require state or local governments to establish procedures to ensure that convicted DV offenders, or those issued DV protective orders, relinquish their firearms. Gaps include the need for enhanced background checks and the need for the development and enforcement of gun removal procedures from those deemed dangerous to self or others how individuals should surrender firearms.

Authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation #1: Strengthen federal legislation by implementing a nationwide ban on purchase or possession of firearms by DV offenders.

Recommendation #2: Expand DV-related restraining order firearm purchase or prohibitions to those under temporary DV-related restraining orders.

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