

PROTECTING THE PARKLAND GENERATION

Strategies to Keep America's Kids
Safe from Gun Violence

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The courageous young survivors of the horrific school shooting in Parkland, Florida, have collectively raised their voices and declared that it is time for action—they're calling for gun safety laws proven to save lives from this uniquely American epidemic.

No child—in any community—should live in fear of a shooting at their school or in their community. No child should live with the memory of their classmates' deaths. There are simple steps we can take to protect our kids and our communities from gun violence.

Gun Violence Impacts Too Many Kids

Since 1998, nearly 200,000 minors have been shot—a staggering toll—and another 150,000 have experienced a shooting in their schools.¹ Among 14–17 year-olds, 17% have been exposed to gun violence.²

Shootings Cause Lasting Trauma

Children who survive shootings develop post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and fearfulness, and can experience long-term decreases in academic achievement.³ One study found a 6% decrease in 9th-grade enrollment at schools that had experienced a deadly shooting.⁴

Violence Interferes with Education

Two-thirds of school districts now require schools to conduct active-shooter drills, with kids as young as two participating.⁵ These drills, and other costly security measures, can divert funds and time that are needed for education and create a culture of anxiety.⁶

KIDS AND FIREARMS KEY NUMBERS

17x

US children and teens are 17 times more likely to die from gun violence than their peers in other high-income countries.⁷

40%

Studies show at least 40% of children in high-violence urban areas have witnessed a shooting.⁸

60%

Nearly 60% of high schoolers report concerns about a potential mass shooting in their school or community.⁹

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“I woke up to the news that my best friend was gone. And I don’t understand why I can still go in a store and buy a weapon of war.”

–Sam Zeif, Stoneman Douglas High survivor, 18

“I just want something to change. This can’t keep happening with no change. It’s just so painful.”

–Carly Novell, Stoneman Douglas High survivor, 17

Four Ways to Protect Kids from Gun Violence

PREVENT ACCESS TO GUNS

Nearly 1.7 million American kids live in homes where guns are loaded and unlocked.¹⁰ Children find them and, tragically, use them in unintentional shootings, teen suicides, and school shootings. Enacting laws that require safe storage, punishing adults who make it easy for children to access guns, and encouraging the development of gun safety technology will save kids' lives.

RAISE THE MINIMUM AGE

The shooters in Newtown and Parkland were too young to buy beer but old enough to purchase AR-15–style rifles. We should strengthen age requirements, beginning by prohibiting anyone under 21 from purchasing semiautomatic rifles.

DISARM DANGEROUS PEOPLE

The Parkland shooter exhibited warning signs that he was armed and dangerous, even posting online that he wanted to become a school shooter. Extreme Risk Protection Order laws allow law enforcement and family members to petition a court to temporarily disarm people like him and other potentially violent individuals.

INVEST IN URBAN VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

For black families in America, the chance of a male child dying from a gunshot wound is 62% higher than dying in a motor vehicle crash.¹¹ Strategic intervention programs in urban communities plagued by gun violence have been able to cut gun homicide rates by as much as 50% in as little as two years.¹² States should fund and support these lifesaving programs.

PROGRESS IS POSSIBLE

333

suicides by youths age 14–18 have been prevented in states with child access prevention laws.¹³

23%

Child access prevention laws are associated with a 23% decrease in unintentional child shooting deaths.¹⁴

210+

lifesaving gun safety laws have been enacted in 45 states and DC since the tragedy at Sandy Hook.

WE'RE ON A MISSION TO SAVE LIVES

For nearly 25 years, the legal experts at Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence have been fighting for a safer America by researching, drafting, and defending the laws, policies, and programs proven to save lives from gun violence. Founded in the wake of a 1993 mass shooting in San Francisco, in 2016 the Law Center joined with former Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords to form a courageous new force for gun safety that stretches coast to coast.

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Welcome

Since 2000, more than 150,000 Americans were killed or injured by a gun before their 18th birthday. These children deserved to grow up and grow old, free to live and learn, and free from fear. But our nation failed them.

As complicated as gun policy can often seem, there are some very simple truths that help explain this uniquely American phenomenon. There is simply no other high-income nation on earth that has let gunmakers and gun extremists write its gun safety laws. No other high-income nation on earth makes weapons of war available—immediately, with no questions asked—to unvetted buyers intent on mass murder. No other high-income nation on earth has to routinely bury children gunned down in their classrooms and movie theaters and churches and parks. It doesn't have to be this way.

It's been tempting for some people to turn away from the pain and shame of these tragedies, or to give in to the cynical lie that this violence can't be prevented.

But not anymore.

This year, America's young people are demanding change and building a movement for gun safety reform. We have watched in awe as young students emerged from bullet-ridden classrooms in Parkland, Florida, and exclaimed *Never again*. We have witnessed their courage and eloquence as they stood up on national television to US Senators and NRA celebrities, demanding action, answers, and accountability. This generation—the future leaders of our country—understands that gun violence is not inevitable. And they know that the Second Amendment is not under threat. We are.

Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence presents this report as a tool for this new generation of activists. It provides data about the scope of the gun violence problem facing America's youth and offers concrete recommendations for evidence-based policies that save lives. Our goal is to support the Parkland students and the thousands of young people they have inspired, as well as the lawmakers who hear their call for action and want to work together to make a change. Despite the brutal pain that follows each tragic shooting in our country, the courage of our nation's youth shines a brighter light on our future.



With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robyn Thomas" with a stylized flourish at the end.

ROBYN THOMAS

Executive Director

Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence

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INTRODUCTION

A generation of children is growing up under the persistent threat of gun violence—they are not staying silent, and neither will we.

On Valentine's Day of 2018, a horrifying gun massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, resulted in the loss of 17 innocent lives and sent shockwaves of grief across our nation. The city of Parkland had been named the safest in Florida just the previous year. Though the entire community continues to grapple with shock, sadness, and trauma, in the days after the devastating murders, the young people of Parkland responded with courage by making the case for changing Florida and America's laws to protect children from future acts of violence. The students' leadership inspired nationwide activism in support of strengthening our nation's firearm policies and building a world where all kids can live without fear of a school shooting.

In the Parkland students, America witnessed a brave new generation of leaders who refuse to accept that any child has to live in fear of violence. Many of these student leaders have grown up with this fear themselves. The students who survived the Parkland shooting, mostly ages 14 through 18, were all born after the massacre in 1999 at Columbine High School in Colorado, in which two students hunted their peers through school, shooting and killing 12 of them. Many of the Parkland students were in elementary school in December 2012, when 20 first-graders and six educators were brutally slain by a gunman armed with a weapon of war. Some of today's teenagers

grew up having survived Sandy Hook or a mass shooting like it, their bodies intact, but their minds forever imprinted with the mark of unimaginable violence. Others grew up without being directly victimized, but having become fearful after seeing tragedy strike school after school and community after community.

For the Parkland students in February, their fear was no longer just a bogeyman, but in their classroom, armed with an AR-15-style firearm, the same type of military-grade assault weapon used to slaughter first graders at Sandy Hook.

Tragically, the Parkland, Sandy Hook, and Columbine massacres are just a few of many examples of shootings in American schools in the past several decades, as firearms have proliferated and the NRA has fought to weaken gun laws. Since Columbine, more than 150,000 students in at least 170 elementary, middle, and high schools have experienced school shootings.¹ All the children at each of these schools—even those not in the classrooms targeted for execution—have been impacted by the acute trauma of these events, as have their parents and teachers.

Every day in America, school-aged children, even some preschoolers as young as two years old, are practicing what to do when an individual intent on murder is roaming their school with an assault weapon.²

Moreover, while school shootings are more likely to make national news and bewilder our collective consciousness, sadly, they represent just a fraction of the gun violence experienced by American youth. Children are exposed to many types of shootings, both fatal and nonfatal, from homicides and attacks, particularly in underserved urban areas. They are also exposed to gun suicides, unintentional shootings, domestic violence perpetuated with guns, and mass shootings outside of schools, of which there are far, far too many.

For Americans ages 14–17, the rate of lifetime exposure to shootings (including hearing gunshots as well as seeing someone shot) is 17%.³ One review of academic studies involving over 5,000 children in urban areas indicated that, astoundingly, at least 40% of them had witnessed a shooting⁴—and many of the victims of this violence witnessed by children are their very own family members or friends.⁵ Rural students are not isolated from gun violence either. A substantial number of students in less populated areas are also exposed to shootings, including suicides and homicides, as a result of firearm access, which can be exacerbated by parents' failure to safely secure firearms.⁶

Beyond physical injuries, gun violence has life-altering implications for the kids who witness or survive shootings, particularly with regard to their mental health. This in turn puts them at risk of perpetrating violence themselves, performing poorly in school

and at work, and having long-term physical health problems related to poor sleep and anxiety. In real economic terms, America also pays a steep price when minors are subjected to gun violence. One estimate puts the annual cost of gun violence to children alone at at least \$21 billion.⁷

Reducing the number of children who are victimized by gun violence requires, first, a fuller understanding of the scope of the problem, and second, an investigation of the solutions that show the most promise for protecting the safety of young people. Part I of this report examines the impact of gun violence on minors using public health data and research to illuminate the tremendous personal and societal costs of this epidemic on children. Part II describes the evidence-based policies that can be adopted federally and at the state level to meaningfully reduce kids' exposure to and experience of gun violence.

As this report will discuss, the number of children who die from firearm homicides or injuries is unacceptable. While firearm deaths of minors saw some decline between 2006 and 2013, a dramatic increase in gun purchases after Sandy Hook correlated with a sharp increase in the gun death rates of minors.⁸ Suicides by children and teens have also been steadily increasing since 2007.⁹

America stands apart from the rest of the developed world in allowing its children to become victims of gun violence—91% of children in high-income countries who are killed with firearms are from the United States.¹⁰ Guns are now the third-leading cause of death for all Americans under age 18.¹¹

Despite these sobering statistics, there is reason to be hopeful: we know that meaningful progress and policy changes are possible. Though there is a common misconception that Sandy Hook did not usher in any gun policy reforms, that terrible shooting actually marked a significant turning point. Parents, legislators, and gun violence prevention advocates around the country mobilized to form dozens of new anti-violence groups, collaborating with lawmakers and groups like Giffords Law Center to pass over 210 new gun violence prevention laws in 45 states and DC. We've studied the impact of these and other gun safety laws, and we know they work: as our ***Annual Gun Law Scorecard*** (gunlawscorecard.org) demonstrates, states with stronger firearm laws have fewer gun deaths per capita than states with weak laws.

Now, over five years after Sandy Hook, it's possible—and imperative—for all 50 states to continue this forward momentum by enacting the types of evidence-based gun safety laws discussed in this report. Our policy recommendations, described in Part II, will help to protect children through laws that prevent kids from accessing guns, raise the minimum age for purchasing firearms, disarm dangerous people, and establish community-based violence prevention and intervention programs.

While the progress made since Sandy Hook has undoubtedly helped prevent shootings and save lives, only so much can be achieved without stronger gun laws nationwide. School shootings have continued, and we now have a generation of American youth that has been raised to anticipate gun violence coming to their schools, as it did in Parkland. Yet despite the incomprehensible grief and trauma the Parkland teenagers have experienced, they have shown they are determined to change the trajectory of their story and stop shootings like this from happening again. They're breaking through the cracks left in the gun lobby's armor following Sandy Hook, and insisting on accountability for the federal legislators who slink away after each national tragedy, saying now is not the time to talk about gun laws and offering hollow thoughts and prayers.

Gun safety is moving forward, and we now stand at a crossroads, where our lawmakers have to face a resounding national outcry for long-overdue reform that will better protect the safety of our communities. They owe it to the Parkland survivors, the Newtown families, and children everywhere to finally act.

PART ONE

The Brutal Toll Gun Violence
Exacts on American Kids

Gun violence alters young lives in irreparable ways, inflicting staggering psychological and societal costs.

Young people exposed to gun violence, whether as a result of a school shooting incident or unsafe conditions in their community, face life-altering repercussions. At school, kids and teens are inundated with active shooter drills that foster fear and anxiety in what should be a safe space. And at home, too many children live in neighborhoods where gun violence is part of everyday life. These ever-present fears can hamper healthy childhood development or lead to serious debilitating conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder, and they can even lead children to engage in violent behaviors themselves.

DEBILITATING FEAR AND ANXIETY

Most American schoolchildren have been alive for at least six of the 10 deadliest mass shootings in American history.¹ Unsurprisingly, a majority of high school students report feeling realistically concerned about a mass shooting in their school or community.² Children in neighborhoods where shootings are a daily occurrence worry about being hit by stray bullets as they walk home from school or sit on their front porch. They are taught to hide under beds or in bathtubs at the sound of gunfire. These realities rob children of any sense of safety and security, which can have a lasting, detrimental impact on their lives.

The rise of mass shootings has coincided with the rise of the internet, the 24-hour news-cycle, and social media. Children today are inundated with images and tales of other children being shot. In the case of Parkland, not only did traditional news media cover the shooting, many survivors used their phones to record their own experiences of the event, sharing these videos widely and offering a more personal, identifiable—and terrifying—perspective on a national tragedy. Given this landscape, it should be far from surprising that the majority of American children are concerned about a shooting happening in their communities.

In the absence of comprehensive gun safety reform, school districts and teachers feel no choice but to teach kids to protect themselves from attackers in much the same way they teach them to stop, drop, and roll for a fire. While well-intentioned (and given the likelihood of a school shooting in America, necessary), these trainings exacerbate underlying fears of gun violence. Nearly 95% of students in American public schools are taught to barricade, hide, or run from shooters in their schools.³ Many teachers say they've provided additional instruction, outside of school-wide drills, about how students should respond to attackers.⁴ Some of these drills are extremely realistic, with pretend shooters firing blanks in the hallways of schools.⁵ These drills, however, can intensify the fear of gun violence children already suffer and train them to persistently worry about their own safety. For example, one mother reports how her nine-year-old has selected a particular corner in which to hide if there were a gunman in the hallway; her seven-year-old has thought about how he would run in a zig-zag pattern to avoid gunfire.⁶ One 15-year-old has described how she and her friends talk about where they're safest within their school: "You're dead if you're in the library. Chemistry room is probably okay. Fire drills put everyone out in lines in the field like sitting ducks."⁷ A high school senior questioned whether any of her classmates fit the "school shooter stereotype" after someone threatened to attack her school.⁸ Although these trainings are intended to teach kids important survival techniques were the unthinkable to occur, they also make children feel less safe and secure,⁹ and it is completely unacceptable that our leaders have allowed things to get to this point. Our national reaction to gun violence must be to use comprehensive gun reform to prevent shootings before they happen, not to ignore our children's safety until it's too late.

Decades of research show that safety and security are essential elements for successful child development. Children who feel safe are more relaxed and comfortable exploring their environments.¹⁰ The fear of being shot for no reason coupled with the nation's indifference to protecting children from this violence will naturally make youth more afraid to be left alone or to live their lives.¹¹ Fear of gun violence can have other detrimental impacts on child development as well. Children who are exposed to or afraid of gun violence are more likely to experience anxiety and sleep disturbances, including night terrors.¹² Young children exposed to gun violence

may also regress in developmental achievements like language skills.¹³ Ultimately, exposure to gun violence, both directly and indirectly, can impede a child's normal path of development, which in turn can have myriad negative individual and societal effects. The consequences of gun violence ripple out far beyond the more than 115,000 Americans shot every year, detrimentally impacting an entire generation of children and ultimately damaging American society for untold years to come.

PERSISTENT TRAUMA

For some children, the threat of gun violence may provoke insecurity and anxiety, but for many more children, exposure to gun violence leads to debilitating stress and fear. After her best friend was murdered during a shooting at their Townville, South Carolina elementary school, six-year-old Ava Olsen was plagued by crippling trauma. She started hitting herself and pulling out her eyelashes. She began covering up “scary words” in her books like gun, fire, and kill. She lost interest in things she once enjoyed, like cheerleading and the movie *Frozen*. She often repeats “I hate my life,” which the shooter screamed before beginning his attack. A doctor diagnosed her with severe post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, and recommended that she be homeschooled.¹⁴

Ava's experience is, unfortunately, all too common. Gun violence is significantly associated with trauma among youth.¹⁵ The most common manifestation of this trauma is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In fact, nearly 40% of children exposed to a shooting will develop PTSD.¹⁶ Children who directly witness gun violence or lose a close friend or family member in a shooting are more likely to have severe PTSD symptoms. For example, eight months following a 2001 shooting at a California high school, nearly 10% of students who witnessed or directly experienced the shooting suffered from symptoms of PTSD. Comparatively, 3% of students who were not exposed or only witnessed chaos—but not the actual shooting—displayed symptoms of PTSD.¹⁷

The effects of trauma and PTSD can hit particularly hard in urban areas, where shootings and violence can be daily and even hourly events. Studies have shown that 52% of urban youth exposed to violence have severe PTSD symptoms, while over 80% have at least some PTSD symptoms.¹⁸ Another study found that 27% of children living in violent urban areas met the official diagnostic criteria for PTSD.¹⁹ As Howard Spivak of the National Institute of Justice has said, “Youth living in inner cities show a higher prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder than soldiers.”²⁰

Domestic violence homicides, which are disproportionately committed with guns, can also lead to PTSD and trauma among youth, even when children are not directly targeted. Children who lose parents to domestic violence can suffer severe trauma, and studies show that losing a loved one, particularly a parent, has a detrimental impact on

children that can make them especially vulnerable to psychological problems, including PTSD.²¹ When one parent uses a gun to kill the other, children lose both parents at once: not only the murdered parent, but the perpetrator as well, who is detained, on the run, or dies by suicide.²²

PTSD and trauma not only impact children who witness horrific, intentional acts of violence or live in neighborhoods where gunfire is a daily occurrence. All too often, children get hold of guns and unintentionally kill other children or beloved adults. These children must cope with the range of emotions that accompany these tragedies and grow up with the knowledge that they have, even without intending to, taken someone else's life. One night, nine-year old Christian Pittman was playing with his 12-year old brother in their Durham, North Carolina home. Christian's mother's shotgun was leaning against the refrigerator and his older brother picked it up, thinking the gun was unloaded. He pointed it at his younger brother and pulled the trigger, killing Christian. Christian's older brother was distraught and confused after the shooting. Immediately afterward, Christian's brother screamed for help. In the months after the shooting, Christian's brother has struggled, and has even talked about ending his own life.²³

Exposure to gun violence is especially traumatic for children and teens because their brains are still malleable and developing. Witnessing gun violence can actually alter the shape of children's brains, impairing normal development.²⁴ These changes in brain structure can severely impact children's day-to-day and long-term functioning. Children who are exposed to trauma, particularly those who develop PTSD, are often hyper-aware of their surroundings and are easily startled.²⁵ They may perceive danger even in safe situations.²⁶ Children traumatized by gun violence may be more easily startled by noises that sound like gunfire, such as backfiring cars and popping balloons.²⁷ Additionally, children with PTSD may show decreased interest in activities they once enjoyed, just like Ava.²⁸

The effects of PTSD can be further exacerbated by the fact that traumatized children may isolate themselves from supportive social networks. Children who experience gun violence may distance themselves from peers to avoid triggering memories of the violence.²⁹ For example, children with visible physical injuries may find that their injuries prompt questions, and these questions can trigger memories of the event.³⁰ Such children may choose to avoid interaction with other children as a result.³¹ Additionally, children can feel tremendous guilt after incidents of gun violence, even if they are not at all responsible.³² Young children in particular can be susceptible to this guilt—they sometimes feel that they should have been able to prevent the violence.³³ Children and teens can also feel survivor's guilt.³⁴ For example, many survivors and bystanders agonize during school shootings about whether to help victims or to flee for their own safety.³⁵ Children who flee and are uninjured may feel guilty interacting with other survivors, particularly survivors who were injured.³⁶

Youth exposed to gun violence can suffer from other psychiatric problems as a result of trauma and PTSD. For instance, nearly 40% of adolescents with PTSD also had depression.³⁷ Additionally, youth with PTSD can display attention deficits as well as aggressive and delinquent behaviors.³⁸ The psychiatric consequences of exposure to gun violence as a child can continue to manifest well into adulthood.³⁹ Adolescents who witnessed violence are significantly more likely to experience depression as adults.⁴⁰

Gun violence exposure and resulting trauma can also lead to physical ailments that can persist into adulthood. Children who have witnessed gun violence often develop chronic or recurrent physical pains, such as headaches or stomachaches.⁴¹ Studies have documented that adults who experienced trauma as children have higher rates of chronic health conditions, such as cardiovascular disease.⁴² Some of these health problems may be attributable to or compounded by the fact that trauma-exposed youth are more likely to engage in more impulsive behaviors that can have adverse health outcomes, such as risky sexual behaviors, illicit substance use, and smoking.⁴³

CYCLICAL VIOLENCE

When young people grow up afraid of shootings in their neighborhoods or schools, it only makes sense they would feel the need to protect themselves. This, however, can fuel cycles of violence, leading to more shootings and, ultimately, even greater fear in a community. Studies have shown that exposure to gun violence significantly increases the likelihood that adolescents will carry guns.⁴⁴ Teens are also more likely to report carrying a weapon if they have a family member who has been shot.⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly, adolescents who report carrying guns overwhelmingly cite self-protection as their primary motivation.⁴⁶ Although guns may make adolescents *feel* safer, in reality the presence of a firearm has the opposite effect. Research overwhelmingly indicates that people who carry weapons are at an increased risk for fighting, being injured or hospitalized, or injuring others.⁴⁷

In addition to increasing the likelihood that youth will carry guns, children and teens who are exposed to gun violence are more likely to respond to situations with violence—a dangerous and deadly combination. While only a small segment of children will ever become violent, several studies have shown exposure to violence to be a risk factor for aggression and violence in minors.⁴⁸ This relationship may be explained in part by trauma-related disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), that result from exposure to violence.⁴⁹ In fact, aggressive behavior is one of the common manifestations of PTSD, particularly in adolescents.⁵⁰

Although exposure to any violence increases the risk of perpetrating violence in the future, research suggests that gun violence may have an even greater deleterious

effect on minors than other types of violence. Youth exposed to gun violence are more likely to resort to violence to resolve conflict or express emotion,⁵¹ and one study noted that seventh- and eighth-grade students who reported direct exposure to gun violence had a 36% increase in the number of recent aggressive episodes.⁵² Additionally, adolescent exposure to shootings nearly doubles the probability of perpetrating serious violence in the subsequent two years.⁵³ Ultimately, gun violence may uniquely increase aggressive and violent behavior among minors.

Minors exposed to gun violence are also at greater risk of harming themselves. After the Columbine massacre, a student suffering from PTSD killed himself; he had lost two close friends and watched his basketball coach die in the massacre.⁵⁴ The research connecting adult suicide rates to community violence is strong,⁵⁵ and the nexus between PTSD and teen suicide is undeniable.⁵⁶ Research examining suicide rates among adolescents exposed to community violence is, as of this writing, less conclusive,⁵⁷ but it is far from inconceivable that children and adolescents who experience the most severe and traumatic forms of interpersonal gun violence may be at increased risk for suicide.

Children impacted by gun suicide in their families or communities may also be at greater risk of committing violence. Exposure to suicide is a significant risk factor for future violence, particularly against oneself, and guns are used in over 50% of American suicides, due to both their lethality and their easy availability.⁵⁸ Children and teens exposed to a peer's suicide are more likely to attempt or die by suicide. Several studies have documented a "suicide contagion" effect, wherein one suicide leads to additional suicides and self-violence. An analysis of high school students found that "teens who know friends or family members who have attempted suicide are about three times more likely to attempt suicide than are teens who do not know someone who attempted suicide."⁵⁹ Another study found that adolescents who know about a friend's suicide attempt are nearly twice as likely to attempt suicide themselves one year later; teens who lose a friend to suicide are at even higher risk.⁶⁰

The data suggests that a similar contagion effect can occur after mass or school shootings. One recent study found that many mass killings involving firearms are motivated by similar events in the immediate past,⁶¹ and a 2014 analysis revealed a minimum of 17 school attacks and 36 plots or serious threats against schools were at least partly inspired by Columbine.⁶² Additionally, each day in the week following the Parkland shooting saw nearly 50 threats or violent incidents at schools nationwide, an increase from 10–12 each day.⁶³

The evidence is clear: gun violence begets future violence, with shootings contributing to homicide and suicide well into the future and damaging children and communities.

Preventing just one school shooting has the potential to stem many more incidents of violence, and if somehow saving even a single child's life wasn't motivation enough to rethink our country's approach to guns, breaking the cycle of violence in our communities for years to come should be.

SEVERE ECONOMIC COSTS

The emotional and physical effects of gun violence can impact children for the rest of their lives, and so too can the financial burden of shootings. Beyond the human tragedy involved, shootings generate a series of economic costs that begin to amass as soon as the trigger is pulled. Gun violence results in significant costs in the form of criminal justice expenses, medical bills, lost taxes, diminished business opportunities, and lower wages. Economists have estimated that gun violence among youth alone costs at least \$21 billion each year.⁶⁴ For all Americans, that figure is over \$229 billion.⁶⁵

Six-year-old Willie Young's life was changed by a single stray bullet shot outside an Inglewood, California home. His mother wept when she learned that Willie would never walk again—he was paralyzed from the chest down. Although the physical and emotional toll of this incident and other gunshot wounds is enormous, so too are the medical costs. According to a study of childhood injuries, gunshot injuries require more frequent major therapeutic interventions and have higher per-patient costs than any other childhood injuries.⁶⁶ Many of the thousands of children who survive shootings each year, like Willie, require extensive, complex medical treatment. Some victims will require physical therapy, prescription medications, and other treatment for the rest of their lives. Take brain and spinal cord trauma, which entails 16% of nonfatal gunshot injuries for people under 21.⁶⁷ These injuries can result in serious long-term neurologic problems, yet the life expectancy for people with severe spinal cord injuries is not significantly diminished.⁶⁸ Studies suggest that the life expectancy for even persons with complete quadriplegia can be up to seventy percent of the life expectancy for the general population.⁶⁹ If Willie lives seventy percent of the current life expectancy of 76 years, he will require costly and long-term medical treatment for approximately 47 years.⁷⁰

Shootings also result in substantial mental health expenses for both surviving children and their loved ones. Children who survive shootings often undergo costly therapy to address the ongoing mental and emotional toll of the incident. Additionally, when children are killed, their family and peers are likely to seek mental health services to cope with their grief. One study estimates that for each homicide victim, an average of 1.5 to 2.4 people seek mental health treatment.⁷¹ Even children who are merely exposed to gun violence in their schools or communities may require costly mental health

services. When these mental health needs are not met, there can be even higher long-term costs, as untreated trauma can lead to severe depression and suicidal behavior.⁷²

Many of these medical and mental health costs are borne directly by taxpayers. Over 66% of children under the age of 21 who were treated for gunshot injuries were uninsured or on Medicaid, a publicly funded insurance.⁷³

Taxpayers also shoulder substantial law enforcement and criminal justice expenses related to gun violence involving children. There are substantial costs related to police responses to crime scenes, particularly when they must confront or pursue a suspect. Police investigations of gun violence crimes can also be both lengthy and costly. If a suspect is arrested, there are enormous costs associated with bringing that person to justice, including the costs of a trial and, if a conviction is obtained, prolonged incarceration. So while the victim of a shooting is receiving expensive medical treatment, the perpetrator is also receiving costly attention from the criminal justice system, generating an enormous that is covered largely by taxpayers.

Gun violence also has a negative effect on the health of the local economy, which can affect the economic stability of families and children. Neighborhoods plagued by persistent and chronic community violence can be particularly susceptible to decreased economic opportunity.⁷⁴ In general, higher numbers of gun homicides in a census tract correspond with fewer employment opportunities, as many businesses may choose to leave violent neighborhoods in search of safer areas.⁷⁵ Businesses that remain in violent neighborhoods may limit their hours of operation so as not to be in business during times of peak violence.⁷⁶ These closures limit employment opportunities for community members. The lack of stable and legal employment opportunities may depress the economic stability of families, which can have detrimental effects on children.

Although the cost of any shooting is enormous, the financial costs related to high-fatality mass shootings are, by far, the greatest. For example, the financial toll of the Sandy Hook massacre continued to accumulate for years after the shooting. Although the shooter died by suicide before being apprehended by police, the costs of the police investigation were massive. The FBI undertook a years-long investigation to understand the shooter's motives. A report detailing this investigation was not released until nearly five years after the shooting, indicating that FBI personnel and resources were dedicated to this investigation for several years.⁷⁷ Additionally, the mental health costs of this shooting were astronomical. The town of Newtown, Connecticut has received nearly \$9 billion in federal grants alone to help residents recover from the trauma of the Sandy Hook shooting.⁷⁸ The main mental health agency in the town quadrupled its counseling staff—adding 29 positions—in the

months following the shooting to handle the number of residents needing services.⁷⁹ Furthermore, one report about how to grow economic activity in the Sandy Hook community noted that elementary school itself was a “major traffic driver for the village” and that the loss of the school directly impacted the community’s economy.⁸⁰ Although the school has since been rebuilt, this finding would suggest that there was at least a period in which the community suffered severe economic losses.

Concerns about school safety also generate substantial financial costs. In response to school shootings, school districts have devoted staggering amounts of money toward increased school security. For example, a school district in Minnesota spent nearly \$25,000 on bulletproof whiteboards that children can hold up to shield themselves from gunfire.⁸¹ Following Sandy Hook, a Texas school district spent over \$21.5 million building a school with the most advanced security features, including over 50 cameras across the campus and bulletproof glass on the front doors.⁸² Since the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School, the federal government has spent at least \$811 million to help school districts hire security guards, including \$45 million since the Sandy Hook shooting.⁸³ State and local governments have also funded additional security guards in schools. Although these costs are significant on their own, they are part of an even larger pool of expenses related to school security. One research group projected that spending on school security would total nearly \$5 billion in 2017.⁸⁴ While schools will always have to expend some funds on safety, in a world without gun violence, these expenditures would undoubtedly be significantly lower.⁸⁵

Additionally, there are opportunity costs associated with safety measures in response to school shootings. When school districts allocate resources towards school safety, they often have to make cuts elsewhere. One Indiana school district spent \$400,000 on increased school security measures—despite the fact that the district was forced to lay off five teachers and make cuts to the hours of school support staff.⁸⁶ According to one analysis, the \$400,000 spent on school security could fund the salaries and benefits for eight full-time teachers for one year.⁸⁷ Thus, it is important to remember that when schools are compelled to implement stronger security measures, there can be damaging cuts to educational services to children.

DIMINISHED POTENTIAL

Perhaps the greatest casualty of gun violence against children is the loss of individuals who would otherwise go on to live productive lives. In the Parkland shooting alone, students with undeniably bright futures had their lives cut short—a talented trombonist, a swimmer with a scholarship to the University of Indianapolis, a junior ROTC member who also volunteered with Hurricane Irma relief efforts. Even the

students who didn't lose their lives that day may be forced to forego their dreams due to debilitating injuries that result in long-term physical limitations. Children and teens who don't suffer physical injuries as a result of gun violence still suffer the consequences, however. Exposure to gun violence can lead to significant declines in academic performance which have long-term consequences.

Seven-year-old Siena, a survivor of a shooting at her South Carolina Elementary School, negotiates with her parents each morning about going to school.⁸⁸ She often says she doesn't feel well enough to go, but her parents know that it is really fear that makes her want to stay home. When children are exposed to gun violence, they are more likely to miss school and other activities. Gun violence exposure in schools and communities can lead to "school refusal behavior" and "school phobia," in which children may have intense anxieties and fears that prompt pleas for to stay home, where it is safe.⁸⁹ These pleas can result in extended and periodic absences,⁹⁰ driven by fears of violence in schools, particularly school shootings. One Connecticut psychologist remarked that in the past two years, he has seen a "huge uptick" in children as young as six who can't bear to go to school, a phenomenon he did not witness seven years ago.⁹¹ Studies also show that children who are exposed to violence in their communities are more likely to suffer from chronic absenteeism.⁹²

Gun violence can also affect the enrollment in schools, leaving behind students with the fewest resources and the most trauma. A large body of literature shows that families who are better resourced often migrate out of neighborhoods with the highest rates of gun violence, leaving behind residents who don't have the resources to relocate.⁹³ This flight can create high-poverty schools, where the majority of students come from low-income families. The flight of higher-income residents also diminishes the tax base that funds the school system, meaning that the children who remain in violent neighborhoods are concentrated in schools with the fewest educational resources.⁹⁴ This concentrated disadvantage can have detrimental effects on educational attainment.⁹⁵ School shootings may also encourage families to relocate or move their children into different schools. One study found a 6% decrease in school enrollment among ninth-graders in schools that experienced a homicidal shooting.⁹⁶ Children who are forced to change schools, either because of school or neighborhood violence, must face the challenges of adjusting to a new school environment. These disruptions in school enrollment can have negative academic consequences for both students who relocate and students who do not.

Children who are exposed to gun violence, particularly those who suffer from PTSD, can have difficulty concentrating in the classroom. Inability to concentrate is often a side effect of trauma, with many cases of PTSD in youth misdiagnosed as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.⁹⁷ Children who are extremely fearful and hyper-aware

of danger may be more focused on potential threats than academic instruction. For example, one child who survived the Sandy Hook shooting was referred to mental health services because of her inability to concentrate on schoolwork—instead of paying attention in class, she was staring at the door.⁹⁸

While children preoccupied by violence may have more difficulty learning, schools that are similarly preoccupied by violence are also less able to provide quality educations to their students. Measures to prevent violence, including school security increases, take up resources that could otherwise be invested in academics.⁹⁹ Active shooter drills and lockdowns also divert precious class time away from learning,¹⁰⁰ and some teachers take additional time away from instruction to discuss fears stimulated by these drills.¹⁰¹ Additionally, the threat of violence in schools makes school staff and volunteers fearful, which may affect their ability to focus on educating and supporting students.¹⁰² Teachers' attention may also be diverted from educational endeavors as they manage children who have been traumatized by gun violence.¹⁰³ Such diversions can affect the learning environment for all children in the class—not just students traumatized by gun violence.¹⁰⁴

Several studies have shown strong associations between gun violence exposure and decreased performance on academic and aptitude tests. For example, first-graders who were exposed to violence and experience high levels of trauma-related distress had significantly lower IQ and reading ability scores.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, third- through eighth-graders exposed to high levels of neighborhood violence had significantly lower scores on both math and reading achievement assessments, compared to peers who weren't exposed to violence.¹⁰⁶

Lower academic achievement and absenteeism can have significant long-term consequences, with effects that burden children even as they reach adulthood. Studies suggest that decreases in academic achievement likely persist over time, indicating that exposure to violence as even a very young child can have devastating effects on long-term achievement.¹⁰⁷ Chronically absent and less academically proficient children may be less likely to attend college, which can have significant bearing on their futures.¹⁰⁸

Children exposed to gun violence may also have lower long-term aspirations and career ambitions. Although these diminished ambitions may be somewhat tied to lower educational attainment, research has also found that decreased goal-setting is tied to a child's expectations of an early, violent death. For example, a significant number of adolescents living in violent neighborhoods believe that they will die before they turn 35,¹⁰⁹ which in turn leads to lower goal-setting and diminished ambition.¹¹⁰ Additionally, anticipating an early death is significantly correlated with decreased socioeconomic

status as an adult.¹¹¹ Gun violence prevents children from maximizing their potential, thriving academically, and fulfilling their dreams. We owe it to them to do better.

PART ONE SUMMARY

Kids and teens experience profound trauma from gun violence. Young victims of homicide, suicide, and unintentional shootings are robbed of bright futures, while survivors and their loved ones must grapple with destabilizing grief, trauma, and fear. When considering the immense psychological and financial toll gun violence exacts, it's no surprise that young people across the country are taking to the streets demanding the policy changes that can keep kids safe.

PART TWO

Proven Solutions to Save Kids'
Lives from Gun Violence

Proven solutions to protect kids from gun violence exist. But they only work when lawmakers stand up to the NRA and enact them.

Protecting children from gun violence is possible, but we have not done nearly enough to ensure the safety and security of the youngest members of our society. There are a number of effective policy solutions that can help keep guns out of the hands of minors, such as requiring gun owners to responsibly store their firearms or raising the minimum age required to purchase a gun. Other policies ensure at-risk people, like domestic abusers or the dangerously mentally ill, are not allowed to purchase a weapon and ultimately take a life. The state can also help prevent death or trauma associated with shootings by providing funding for evidence-based violence reduction strategies. Any serious efforts to save American children's lives from gun violence requires the comprehensive adoption of the following tried-and-tested gun laws.

PREVENT CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO GUNS

The day before Christmas Eve in 2016 should have been a festive time for Jose Pedro—a 23-year veteran police officer—and two of his sons. On that day, however, in a Cleveland, Ohio, home covered with snow and holiday decorations, Officer Pedro's two-year-old son, Dominic, found his father's service weapon and shot himself. Dominic's older brother discovered the toddler and screamed for help. Not only was Dominic's life cut short that day but his older brother's life was also tragically and

irrevocably changed.¹

These types of heartbreaking unintentional shootings are only one foreseeable result when adults leave firearms accessible to minors, and yet nearly 1.7 million American minors live in homes where guns are kept loaded and unlocked.² And minors know where their parents are keeping their guns—73% of children under age 10 living in homes with guns report knowing where the guns are stored.³

Suicide is a particular risk for minors who live in homes with unsecured firearms.⁴ A large-scale study conducted in 2015 found that roughly 40% of minors who had serious risk factors for suicide (such as recent depression or suicidal thoughts), and roughly 40% who had attempted suicide in the past year, report having “easy access” to the guns in their home.⁵

Unsecured guns in the home pose grave risks to the minors who live there, but also to the general public. A study conducted three years after the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre determined that the majority of US school shootings in K–12 schools were perpetrated by minors.⁶ A federal report also found that 65% of school shooters used guns from their own home or from the home of a relative.⁷

MANDATE SAFE STORAGE OF FIREARMS

A national survey conducted in January 2013 found that 67% of respondents support laws that require unattended guns to be stored in a locked container or with a locking device, such as a trigger lock, to prevent access by a minor or any other unauthorized user.⁸ No federal law⁹ requires responsible gun storage, and Massachusetts is the only state in the nation to mandate that guns be safely stored when not in use.¹⁰ Numerous cities and counties around the country, including New York City, San Francisco, and Chicago, have also adopted this lifesaving policy, but there is clearly much work still to do.¹¹

Data on youth suicides in Massachusetts demonstrate that safe storage laws are effective at preventing children from getting their hands on deadly weapons. Nationally, guns were involved in 39% of youth suicides between 2000 and 2015, but in Massachusetts only 9% of youths took their own lives with guns during that period.¹² Compare this with a 67% rate of gun involvement in youth suicides during the same period in Montana, a state without safe storage or child access prevention laws, and relatively weak gun laws overall. Since guns are harder for children to access in Massachusetts and suicide attempts with firearms are far more lethal than other methods, Massachusetts' overall youth suicide rate was also 61% lower than the national average and 74% lower than Montana's. While Massachusetts is the only state to require safe storage under all circumstances, three additional states—California, Connecticut, and New York—require gun owners to safely store their firearms when

people legally prohibited from possessing guns are present. These states have four of the five lowest rates of youth suicide in the nation.¹³

Safe storage laws are also constitutional. In 2014, the US Court of Appeals for the ninth circuit rejected a lawsuit brought by the NRA and others claiming that San Francisco's safe storage law violated the Second Amendment.¹⁴ The court found that the law did not significantly burden the right to possess a handgun in the home for self-defense, because guns stored safely can be accessed in a matter of seconds and San Francisco's law left open other channels for self-defense in the home by allowing residents to carry firearms. The court also stated that the safe storage law served a significant government interest by "reducing the number of gun-related injuries and deaths from having an unlocked handgun in the home."¹⁵

HOLD IRRESPONSIBLE GUN OWNERS LIABLE

Another key way for states to take meaningful action to promote responsible gun storage and prevent kids from accessing guns is by enacting or strengthening child access prevention (CAP) laws. Rather than explicitly requiring a gun to be locked when not in use, CAP laws impose criminal liability on adults who allow minors unsupervised access to firearms. A majority of states have enacted versions of this policy, but for it to truly make a difference and save lives, it should be enacted at the federal level.

THE FLAWED LOGIC OF ARMING TEACHERS

Arming teachers may be an effective sales strategy for the gun lobby, but it is a decidedly bad idea for protecting students. In addition to being ineffective and dangerous, bringing more guns into schools actually puts children's lives in greater danger. Calls to arm teachers are also a distraction from the real issue—easy access to guns. Expecting teachers to do what our laws should do is as absurd as it is dangerous.

After President Trump suggested educators take up arms to defend students from school shooters, lawmakers in Florida—a state with some of the worst gun laws in the country—approved a measure to spend \$67 million to arm and train school staff.ⁱ This misguided proposal is likely to result in even more shootings at schools, both intentional and accidental. The skills teachers cultivate through their own higher education and experience—the ability to nurture and instruct—do not qualify them to wield lethal weapons in the chaos of active shooter situations, in which even trained law enforcement can make deadly mistakes. An FBI analysis of active shooting incidents found that police officers frequently suffer casualties when they engage active shooters.ⁱⁱ Armed teachers may also be more likely to reach for guns in times of personal stress or conflict, as one Georgia social studies instructor recently did when he fired his gun after barricading himself in his classroom.ⁱⁱⁱ

Policymakers need to focus on preventing shootings before they happen, by keeping guns out of the hands of dangerous individuals, not introducing more deadly weapons into schools.

CAP laws take a variety of forms. California's law is particularly strong, holding adults criminally responsible for making a gun accessible to a minor regardless of whether the minor ever touches the gun.¹⁶ The state also makes an adult civilly liable for damages if the minor causes injury or death to another person as a result of the unauthorized access.¹⁷ Massachusetts, Minnesota, and the District of Columbia also use California's approach of imposing criminal liability on adults who leave firearms accessible to minors, even if the minor never gains access.¹⁸

As with safe storage laws, research has demonstrated that CAP laws are effective at reducing youth suicides, as well as unintentional firearm deaths and injuries. A study that examined the impact of CAP laws over a four-year period found that in states where CAP laws had been in effect for at least one year, firearm deaths fell by 23% among children under 15 years of age.¹⁹ Another study found that CAP laws were associated with an 8% decrease in suicides among 14–17 year olds.²⁰ A 2013 study also found that CAP laws correlate with reductions in nonfatal shootings among minors under age 18.²¹

SUPPORT GUN SAFETY TECHNOLOGY

Safe storage and CAP laws rely on gun owners to ensure their firearms don't fall into children's hands. But gun manufacturers also have a role to play in saving kids' lives from gun violence. There are a range of mechanical and technological innovations gunmakers can and should pursue to prevent children and others from being able to access or fire guns, similar to the approach other industries have taken by implementing childproof caps on pill bottles or fingerprint scanners on smartphones. The most promising of these would allow owners to secure their firearms with "smart gun" safety technology that ensures a gun can only be fired by authorized users. This technology could significantly reduce unintentional child shootings and youth suicides, as it would make it easy for owners to reliably secure their guns from children or teens at risk for harming themselves.²²

Personalized firearms, also known as "smart guns," use technology to let owners control who may access their gun, and ensure that children and teens cannot fire it. Technology that can be used for this purpose includes radio-frequency identification (RFID), which uses radio waves to identify objects, and biometric sensors, like fingerprint readers. **Personalized accessories** use the same technology to add an extra layer of security to gun safes or locking devices. These accessories are more secure than traditional safes and trigger locks, which kids can access if they find the key or are able to pick the lock.

The technology needed to build secure, personalized firearms and accessories already exists. RFID technology was invented in the 1970s, and is used today in

everyday devices like car key fobs and building access cards. Biometric sensors secure many smartphones and are already used in some gun safes. But while this technology is widespread, it has never been incorporated into a firearm sold in US stores. And while biometric safes and locks are being sold, they have not attained a significant market share.

A number of entrepreneurs and start-ups are currently leveraging the latest advancements in security technology and developing lifesaving designs for personalized firearms, gun safes, and trigger locks.²³ But due in part to obstructionism from the gun lobby and lack of leadership from established gun manufacturers, these innovators had trouble raising capital to build, test, and sell lifesaving products.²⁴

Removing the funding barrier for gun safety technology developers is critical; personalized firearms and accessories cannot save lives until they are on the market. There is a clear opportunity for policymakers to support gun safety technology through incentives that can meaningfully advance the technology and help make it available for sale. Targeted grants to directly connect entrepreneurs with necessary funding, tax credits to encourage investment in gun safety research and development, and consumer incentives to purchase firearms and accessories equipped with gun safety technology are all ways to help ensure that personalized firearms and accessories are actually developed and sold—and start saving lives—as soon as possible.

EMPOWER DOCTORS TO DISCUSS GUN SAFETY

Inarguably, pediatricians play a critical role in advising parents and patients of potential health and safety risks to their children. Pediatricians routinely counsel parents on securing prescription drug medication and household chemicals from child access, the risks of drowning in home pools, and the danger of riding bicycles without helmets. Unsurprisingly, researchers found that when pediatricians provided advice about how to safely store firearms, nearly two-thirds of parents improved their gun safety practices.²⁵ But pediatricians' ability to solicit and dispense information about home firearm storage is under attack by the gun lobby.

In 2011, Florida enacted an NRA-backed law that aimed to severely punish pediatricians and other healthcare providers who ask parents and children about access to guns or record information about guns in patients' medical records.²⁶ Following Florida's lead, at the behest of the gun lobby, lawmakers in 13 other states introduced similar legislation between 2013 and 2017. Fortunately, in February, 2017 a federal appellate court sided with the doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers who challenged Florida's "medical gag" law on the basis that it was an unconstitutional infringement on the First Amendment and in a nearly unanimous ruling, struck down the law.²⁷ The ruling has not deterred gun lobby-funded legislators in Iowa and Oklahoma, however,

who currently have medical gag rule legislation pending in their state legislatures.²⁸

Unfortunately, gun lobby efforts to intimidate doctors into avoiding discussions about firearm storage is having some success. A September 2017 survey of emergency pediatric physicians revealed that many physicians do not discuss firearm safety during visits, although they discuss other injury prevention topics such as helmet use, child passenger safety, or childproofing.²⁹ Respondents cited barriers to discussions about firearms as “political restraints, lack of awareness, and legal constraints as compared with barriers to general injury prevention counseling.”³⁰ Approximately 30% of respondents also reported being unclear whether state law allowed them to discuss firearms with their patients.³¹

In addition to rejecting attempts to enact medical gag laws,³² lawmakers can help prevent gun violence by requiring pediatricians and other family doctors to obtain training on safe firearm practices and how to identify patients at risk of suicide. In 2012, Washington State passed a law to require that mental health providers obtain training in the assessment, treatment, and management of suicidal patients every six years as a condition of licensure.³³ Since 2013, Kentucky, Nevada, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Utah have followed suit.³⁴ In addition to replicating these policies in states that have not yet adopted them, to help prevent kids from accessing guns, states should also require similar training in safe storage practices and child access prevention as part of continuing medical education.

RAISE THE MINIMUM AGE TO BUY GUNS

The perpetrators of the two deadliest school shootings in US history—Sandy Hook Elementary and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High—had an important characteristic in common: neither shooter was old enough to buy beer, but both were old enough to purchase the AR-15-style assault weapons they used to murder 34 students and 9 adults. In fact, over 1.6 million high school students can legally buy long guns, such as AR-15-style assault weapons, in their home states, as well as the large capacity magazines that allow shooters to dramatically increase casualties during an attack.³⁵

These shooters share another feature—as 19- and 20-year-olds, they fall into a category of Americans who are disproportionately at risk of committing gun violence. Individuals age 18 to 20 comprise only 4% of the population but commit 17% of gun homicides.³⁶ Based on data from the FBI, 18- to 24-year-olds also account for a disproportionate percentage of arrests for homicide and violent crime in general.³⁷

Young adults ages 18 to 25 also experience the highest rates of serious mental illness,³⁸

and suicide attempts that result in death or treatment in a hospital peak between ages 16 and 21.³⁹ It is well-documented that the biological processes that take place during late adolescence and young adulthood predispose individuals to riskier and less controlled behavior.⁴⁰

In 1984, responding to a public health crisis of intoxicated driving by 18 to 20 year-olds, the US enacted a federal law raising the drinking age to 21.⁴¹ The rate of fatal automobile crashes involving 18- to 20-year-old drivers under the influence of alcohol was 61% in 1982.⁴² By 1995, it had declined to 31%, a larger reduction than for older age groups.

Similar to the reasons why 18- to 20-year-olds lack the biological maturity and brain development to safely drink alcohol, the “challenges with impulse control, emotional regulation, and onset of mental illness” make unsupervised access to firearms by this age group a dangerous combination. Yet federal law allows these young adults to purchase and possess military-style assault weapons, as well as handguns under certain circumstances.

While under federal law, licensed dealers may not sell or transfer handguns to individuals under 21 years of age or long guns to individuals under 18 years of age, federal law is significantly more lenient with transfers between private, or unlicensed, parties.⁴³ Private sellers may not transfer a handgun to an individual who is under 18, but are not required to perform a background check on the person to confirm his or her age.⁴⁴ Federal law places no age restrictions on private sales of long guns, such as AR-15-style assault weapons. It is also generally against federal law for an individual under 18 to possess a handgun or handgun ammunition, but federal law places no age restrictions on a person’s ability to possess a long gun.⁴⁵

While states have the opportunity to set a higher minimum age for firearm purchase or possession than federal law, 15 states set no minimum age whatsoever.⁴⁶ Of those states, five do not generally prohibit transferring a long gun to a minor or regulate assault weapons.⁴⁷ This means that a person of *any* age can legally purchase an AR-15-style assault weapon from a private seller in five American states.

Some states have filled in the gaps left by federal law by raising the minimum ages to purchase or possess handguns or long guns, but only two states—Hawaii and Illinois—require all gun purchasers or owners to be at least 21. Two unsuccessful federal bills introduced during the 2015–16 congressional session would have incentivized states to create mandatory permits for handgun purchases.⁴⁸ Purchasers would have had to be at least 21 to be eligible for a permit. Two bipartisan bills are also currently pending in Congress that would raise the minimum age to purchase and possess an assault rifle to 21.⁴⁹

As the US saw in the late 1980s and 1990s, restricting young adults' access to alcohol addressed the very real problem of drinking and driving fatalities among 18-to 20-year-olds. We now have a similar opportunity to address the very real problem of gun violence perpetrated by young adults. Raising the minimum age to 21 to purchase or possess firearms, with minimum exceptions for non-semiautomatic hunting rifles, will not only protect the public by reducing gun violence committed by these individuals, but it will also protect opportunities for these individuals on the cusp of adulthood to have successful lives.

DISARM DANGEROUS PEOPLE

George Daniel Wechsler, a former corrections officer, lived in Albuquerque, New Mexico, when he started dating Cheryl Mascareñas, who had three children from a previous marriage—Ian (9), Olivia (7), and Elijah (5). Unbeknownst to Cheryl, years earlier, George had been convicted of stalking a girlfriend after parking outside her workplace with binoculars, a video camera, and a gun.

In 2012, another woman reported George to law enforcement because he threatened her and she feared for her safety. He was not prosecuted. In late 2016, a friend notified police that they feared that George was suicidal. Around this time, Cheryl ended her relationship with George. On December 5, 2016, George ambushed Cheryl and her children in front of their home, shooting all four members of the family. Cheryl, though wounded, managed to drag two of her children to the street to wait for help. All three of her children died.⁵⁰

No federal or New Mexico law exists that would have prohibited George from acquiring the firearm he used to murder the Mascareñas children. Unfortunately, a bill in the New Mexico legislature that would have closed this loophole for people subject to a restraining order was vetoed by the state's governor, Susana Martinez.⁵¹

Stories of dangerous individuals who fall through legal loopholes and commit atrocious acts of gun violence have become tragically commonplace in America. In fact, these same consequences define many of the high-profile mass shootings in recent history. Closing loopholes that allow dangerous people to acquire guns and allowing legal procedures to remove gun access by people who are known to be dangerous are essential steps our society can take to reduce gun violence.

ENACT EXTREME RISK PROTECTION ORDERS

In 2014, a young man known to be dangerous to his friends and family shot and killed multiple people in Isla Vista, California, near the University of California, Santa Barbara, campus, after his parents tried unsuccessfully to persuade law enforcement to remove his guns.⁵² California lawmakers swiftly responded to this shooting by enacting a first-of-its-kind law that allows family and household members to ask a court for an order disarming a person who is clearly at risk for committing violence. Under the law, police officers can also petition a court for an order. These types of orders are similar in substance and procedure to domestic violence restraining orders, but rather than restraining a person from contacting or abusing a family or household member, the order prohibits a person from purchasing or possessing firearms for a limited period of time.

Two years after California enacted this law, known as a “Gun Violence Restraining Order,” Washington state voters overwhelmingly approved a similar version known as an “Extreme Risk Protection Order.” Oregon followed suit in August 2017.⁵³ Although it only went into effect on January 1, 2016, California’s law has been used to disarm people on the FBI’s terrorist watchlist, domestic abusers, suicidal individuals, and many others. Connecticut and Indiana have modified versions of these laws that allow law enforcement officers, or, in Connecticut, a state’s attorney, to obtain an order.

Connecticut’s law, which became effective nearly 20 years ago, was the subject of an academic study by Duke University School of Medicine researchers and others.⁵⁴ Published in 2016, the researchers concluded that the law had resulted in temporarily removing weapons from 762 at-risk individuals, thereby preventing 100 suicides. The study also concluded that in 44% of the state’s firearm removal cases, the subject obtained psychiatric treatment they might otherwise not have received.

As successful as Connecticut’s law is, it does not grant standing to those most likely to notice that a loved one is at-risk for violence—family members. By enacting risk-based protection order laws similar to California’s, Washington’s, and Oregon’s, states can have an even greater impact by empowering individuals to prevent violence in their own communities.

CLOSE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LOOPHOLES

The murders of Ian, Olivia, and Elijah Mascareñas and the shooting of their mother are stark examples of the particular threat guns pose to women and children in the United States. American women are 16 times more likely to be killed with a gun than women in other high-income countries.⁵⁵ Domestic gun violence against women, children, and other family members comprises a significant portion of the mass shootings in our

country: approximately 54%, according to one report.⁵⁶ Over half of the 1,352 intimate partner homicides in 2015 were committed with firearms,⁵⁷ abused women are five times more likely to be killed by their abuser if the abuser has access to a gun,⁵⁸ and an increasing percentage of domestic homicides involve a parent killing a child.⁵⁹

Even when impacted minors aren't shot or killed themselves in these domestic violence incidents, the collateral damage to their lives is catastrophic.

Twenty-two years ago, Congress passed the Lautenberg Amendment, which prohibits gun purchase or possession by domestic abusers convicted of misdemeanors or subject to restraining orders issued after a court hearing.⁶⁰ The Lautenberg Amendment has been remarkably successful—thanks to the law, between November 30, 1998, and July 31, 2014, over 109,000 people convicted of a misdemeanor crime of domestic violence and over 46,000 people subject to domestic violence protective orders were denied purchase of a firearm.⁶¹

In the nearly two decades since the Lautenberg Amendment was enacted, however, Congress has taken no further action to disarm domestic abusers and has left many loopholes open that allow abusers to access guns. Federal law does not prohibit gun access by dating partners who are convicted of domestic abuse, despite the fact that intimate partner homicide by dating partners, such as George Wechsler, has been increasing since the enactment of the Lautenberg Amendment and guns are the most frequently utilized weapon.⁶² Another gap in federal law is that it does not prohibit abusers subject to emergency restraining orders from purchasing or possessing guns even though the most deadly risk period for domestic violence survivors is when they first leave their abuser, the time at which an emergency order would be granted.⁶³

Many states, though not enough, have taken action to protect domestic abuse survivors in ways Congress has not—23 states include dating partners in their definitions of domestic violence, and nine states prohibit gun purchase or possession by abusers subject to temporary emergency restraining orders.⁶⁴ The result of these laws is that many more domestic violence abusers are prevented from accessing guns.

By closing the federal and state loopholes through which domestic abusers access guns, much more of the irrevocable damage domestic gun violence causes to minors could be prevented.

REQUIRE BACKGROUND CHECKS FOR ALL GUN SALES

Despite the fact that George Wechsler had nothing in his background that would have prevented him from purchasing the gun he used to kill three innocent children, this is not the case with many perpetrators of gun violence against children in America.

In August 2015, a man with a lengthy criminal record of domestic violence and felony convictions purchased a 9mm handgun over the internet from a private seller in Texas, where he lived. Despite being prohibited from purchasing firearms by both federal and state law, he was able to buy the gun easily because Texas does not require private or unlicensed sellers to conduct background checks on gun purchasers. With his newly acquired handgun, the convicted felon and domestic abuser shot and killed his ex-girlfriend and her partner, as well as five of their children, ages six to 11. He also killed his own child, a 13-year-old boy.⁶⁵

This atrocity is a direct result of substantial weaknesses in our nation's background check laws. Nearly all Americans—97 percent⁶⁶—want background checks to be required for all gun purchases, including purchases from private or unlicensed individuals. Yet federal law only requires licensed dealers to perform background checks.⁶⁷ This is true in the majority of states as well. Unlicensed individuals selling firearms on Armslist.com—a popular, Craigslist-style website for guns—can arrange transactions and complete sales in 32 states, no questions asked.⁶⁸

Background checks, when they are conducted, are effective at preventing dangerous people from purchasing firearms. Since the federal background check requirement for dealer purchases went into effect on February 28, 1994, over 3 million purchases have been denied.⁶⁹ The largest category of individuals who fail background checks are people with felony convictions.⁷⁰ Despite the fact that background checks undoubtedly prevent dangerous people from acquiring firearms, in too many states, it is all too easy for them to circumvent this process by purchasing guns from private sellers. Researchers have determined that large numbers of guns are purchased in private transactions in states without background check requirements.⁷¹

Requiring background checks on all gun sales, not only those conducted by a dealer, is essential to protecting minors from the devastating impact of gun violence. Children who live in states that require background checks on all handgun sales are 52% less likely to experience mass shooting incidents, 52% fewer than children who live in states without that requirement.⁷² Children who live in states that require background checks on all gun sales are also subject to:

- 63% fewer mass shootings by individuals who are prohibited from possessing guns.⁷³
- 64% fewer mass shootings involving domestic violence.⁷⁴
- 38% fewer deaths of women shot by intimate partners.⁷⁵
- 17% fewer firearms involved in aggravated assaults, per capita.⁷⁶

INVEST IN COMMUNITY-BASED INTERVENTION

Cleveland resident Matthew Roberts was shot four separate times before his 26th birthday. Once while witnessing a street fight, once waiting at a bus stop, again while standing in front of a bar, and the fourth time he was hit in a drive-by shooting.⁷⁷ After each shooting, Matthew, a young black man, was treated and promptly released back into the same violent circumstances in which he had already been victimized multiple times. Without an effective intervention, this cycle of violence simply continued, until the fourth shooting, when Matthew was left permanently paralyzed.

Matthew's story is all too common in cities across the nation. Interpersonal gun violence is an enormous component of the overall gun violence epidemic—with more than 14,400 gun-related homicides and tens of thousands more non-fatal shootings in 2016 alone.⁷⁸ Such shootings are disproportionately concentrated in historically underserved urban communities, and young people of color are particularly likely to be victims.

Gun homicide is the leading cause of death for black males ages 15–34, and the rate of gun injuries is 10 times higher for black children and teens than for their white peers.⁷⁹ Witnessing an act of violence can have tremendously detrimental effects on a young person's development, including a higher risk of developing PTSD, and one review of academic studies involving over 5,000 children in urban areas found that at least 40% had witnessed a shooting—often of a family member or friend.⁸⁰

To reduce gun violence in America, we must pair gun safety reforms with meaningful investments in community-based violence intervention programs, which have been shown to quickly and dramatically reduce shootings by strategically focusing resources on the small group of individuals most at risk.

For example, as Matthew's story illustrates, those who have been shot are at extremely high risk of becoming involved in violence again, either as victim or perpetrator. Hospital-based Violence Intervention Programs (HVIPs) break this cycle by matching victims with culturally competent case managers who engage clients in a long-term effort to address underlying risk factors that include lack of educational opportunity, gang membership, and substance abuse issues.

Participation in an HVIP might have changed the course of Matthew's life, but with only 30 such programs scattered around the entire country, the odds of any one individual benefiting from this critical intervention are small.⁸¹ In a 2016 report, ***Healing Communities in Crisis*** (giffordslawcenter.org/healing-communities), Giffords Law Center and the PICO National Network identified the most promising violence intervention strategies in the nation, including HVIPs, street outreach work exemplified

by the Cure Violence model, and the focused deterrence approach of the Group Violence Intervention (GVI) model.⁸² We found that all have something in common aside from strong track records of violence reduction: they still only operate in a handful of cities and neighborhoods.

There is great need to scale these programs up with investments from both the public and private sectors. When properly implemented, consistently funded, and reinforced with strong gun laws, these innovative strategies have achieved lifesaving and cost-saving results in a short period of time. Consider the following results:

- **New Haven, Connecticut**, implemented the GVI strategy in 2011 and has cut the number of fatal and non-fatal shootings in half between 2011 and 2016.⁸³ Connecticut also has some of the nation's strongest gun laws and the fifth-lowest gun death rate among all 50 states.⁸⁴
- **Richmond, California**, created an Office of Neighborhood Safety to coordinate violence intervention programs, including a robust street outreach program, which launched in 2010. The city has since seen a 53% drop in gun homicides and a 45% drop in non-fatal shootings.⁸⁵ California has the nation's strongest gun laws and the eighth-lowest gun death rate in the country.⁸⁶
- **New York City** launched a number of street outreach programs based on the Cure Violence model in 2010 and studies have shown an up to 63% reduction in shootings associated with these programs.⁸⁷ Between 2010 and 2015, New York State, which has some of the strongest gun laws in the country, saw its gun homicide rate drop by 23%. The national gun homicide rate rose by 14% during this same period.⁸⁸

States can play an important role in fostering the development and expansion of these successful strategies. In a new report, *Investing in Intervention* (giffordslawcenter.org/intervention), we highlight how Massachusetts has achieved large reductions in youth gun violence through a substantial investment in programs like its Safe and Successful Youth Initiative (SSYI), which requires cities to provide comprehensive street outreach services to “proven risk” young men.⁸⁹ Between 2010 and 2016, gun homicide rates among 14 to 24-year-olds dropped 49% in Massachusetts even as they rose 17% nationally.⁹⁰ Researchers estimate that state taxpayers have saved as much as \$7.35 for every \$1 invested in SSYI.⁹¹ Only five states currently make a direct investment in strategies like these, and there is great opportunity for other states to step up and take action to prevent gun violence in our most impacted communities.

An intervention at a critical time could have made the difference for Matthew Roberts, and could still make the difference for tens of thousands of young people who are at

risk of being shot each year on our city streets. With a concerted push and a strategic investment in the most promising violence reduction strategies, we can break the cycle of violence for our young people, who deserve to live in freedom from the oppression of daily gunfire.

PART TWO SUMMARY

For too long, America's leaders have allowed gun violence against children to escalate unchecked. We know what they must do: enact laws to prevent children and teens from getting hold of guns, close loopholes that allow dangerous people to access firearms, and fund effective programs to combat violence in underserved communities. The Parkland generation is demanding action. It's long past time our elected leaders found the courage to stand up to the NRA and get it done.

CONCLUSION

America's youngest generation has grown up in an era of increasingly frequent and fatal shootings. They know it doesn't have to be this way.

Today's students have already lived through six of the 10 deadliest mass shootings in modern American history. Tens of thousands of them have been shot in the sort of "everyday" gun violence that doesn't make newspaper headlines but causes profound and devastating pain and trauma to families across our country. And they are fighting to change it.

Children who witness or survive gun violence face enormous, lifelong burdens, as this violence severely impacts young people's physical and emotional growth and well-being, in both the short and long-term. Exposure to gun violence impacts kids' performance at school and in the workplace, later in life, and also makes young people more likely to resort to acts of aggression or violence themselves, perpetuating entrenched cycles of violence in too many communities. The impacts of this violence fall disproportionately on people of color in certain underserved cities, where shootings and violence can be shockingly commonplace. Studies have shown that 80% of youth who are exposed to violence in these environments experience at least some symptoms of PTSD. They have witnessed battlefield conflicts on the civilian streets of America.

In addition to the lives lost and bodies injured, gun violence also imposes enormous financial burdens on our country, and our young people feel this burden too. Many

young victims of gun violence face a long and costly recovery process, sometimes involving lifetime medical costs. Opportunities in their neighborhoods diminish when communities are deemed unsafe, and the tax base flees. And precious resources that could be used to fund a child's enrichment and education are instead diverted to safeguarding school campuses and policing kids' communities.

But solutions exist. Enacting safe storage laws, developing personalized firearm technology, and empowering medical professionals to speak to patients about the dangers of guns in the home are all ways to keep guns away from kids, and to keep kids out of harm's way. Additionally, raising the minimum age to purchase or possess all guns helps to prevent teen suicides, and ensures that no one too young to purchase other regulated substances, like alcohol, can legally buy guns like the ones used at Sandy Hook and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High.

Laws that help disarm dangerous people can play a role here, too. Extreme risk protection order laws can help prevent school and other types of shootings by disarming people who are in crisis and dangerous. Closing domestic violence loopholes is key as well. By working to keep guns out of the hands of domestic abusers, we reduce the chance that more children will be exposed to a dangerous mix of guns and violence in the home. Finally, ensuring that everyone must pass a background check is crucial to prevent people who are not legally allowed to own guns, such as convicted domestic abusers or dangerously mentally ill individuals, from acquiring them.

Lawmakers have a critical role to play in preventing gun violence and protecting our kids. A generation of young people has been profoundly impacted by violence in this country. And they're looking to legislators with the courage and conviction to lead on this issue and enact the solutions described in this report. Let's work together to ensure America's next generation of young people can grow up safer and freer from fear.

Leverage the legal and policy acumen of our experts to develop a plan for protecting children from the pervasive threat of gun violence in our communities. For assistance or more information, email [**lawcenter@giffords.org**](mailto:lawcenter@giffords.org).

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PART TWO

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For nearly 25 years, the legal experts at Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence have been fighting for a safer America by researching, drafting, and defending the laws, policies, and programs proven to save lives from gun violence. Founded in the wake of a 1993 mass shooting in San Francisco, in 2016 the Law Center joined with former Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords to form a courageous new force for gun safety that stretches coast to coast.