

Preventing

**GUN  
VIOLENCE**



## Contents

### Overview

- 1 Introduction
- 1 Deadly Numbers
- 2 But what about the Second Amendment?
- 3 How Can We Respond?
- 3 Christian Advocacy:
  - 5 Introduction
  - 5 Jesus Christ and the Sword

### Christian Views on Violence and Self-Defense

- 6 New Testament Verses Used to Justify Violence
- 7 Creative and Successful Nonviolence
- 8 Christian Advocacy in a Secular Society
  - 9 Introduction
  - 9 Making Connections

### Policy Solutions to Break a Deadly Cycle

- 10 Ending the cycle of gun violence
- 11 Other Gun Violence Prevention Laws
- 12 From Education to Action

### Getting Involved and Taking Action

- 13 Introduction
- 13 Contacting Your Legislators
- 15 Conclusion

### Introduction

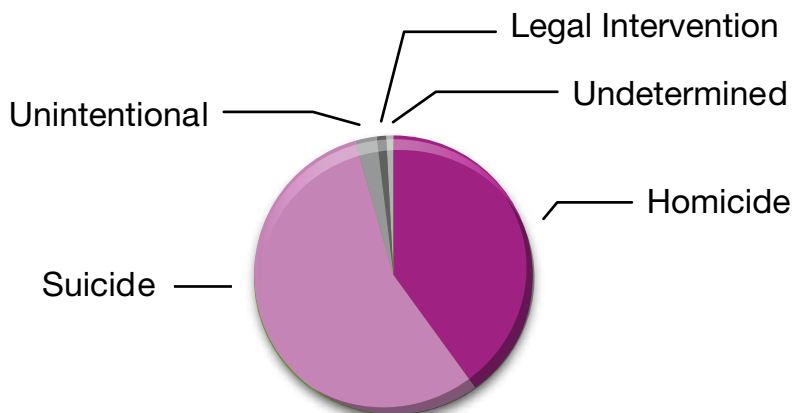
School shootings, gang activity, armed robberies gone awry, desperate calls for attention, young children discovering weapons they can't handle and simple arguments that escalate too far. Gun violence takes the lives of thousands in the United States each year.

The Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office witnesses to the U.S. government, seeking to promote peace and justice domestically and internationally. The prevalence of gun violence in the United States is a major public policy concern that affects too many individuals, families and communities every day.

The Washington Office has provided this Gun Violence Prevention folder to help equip individuals, small groups and churches to advocate for the prevention of gun violence. It includes background materials, a faith reflection, policy suggestions and advocacy tips to provide the tools you need to make a difference and save lives.

This introductory overview provides:

- Statistics about gun deaths.
- An analysis of the Second Amendment right to bear arms.
- An outline of constitutional and non-intrusive gun violence prevention laws that can keep guns off the illegal market and out of the hands of criminals, juveniles and the mentally ill.



**Types of Gun Deaths**

### Deadly Numbers

From 1985 to 2010, more than 800,000 people died from gunshot wounds and other firearm fatalities in the United States.

Approximately 30,000 people are killed by firearms each year. Many more are wounded.<sup>1</sup>

This number marks an improvement since 1993, when a record 39,595 gun deaths occurred. But progress toward lowering the number further stalled during the last decade.

### Causes of death

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which tracks and provides reputable figures for domestic mortality rates, breaks gun deaths into four categories: homicides, suicides, legal interventions and accidental deaths.

#### Homicides

In 2010, 11,078 people were murdered with a firearm. The vast majority of all murders, 68 percent, were committed with firearms.

More than 30 people are shot and murdered each day, including an average of eight children and teenagers under the age of twenty.

#### Suicides

In 2010, 19,392 people committed suicide using a firearm. Firearms were used in more than half of all suicides.

This makes suicide the most common cause of gun death in the United States.

Taking steps such as implementing thorough background checks for mental illness might help reduce this number.

#### Legal intervention

In 2010, 334 people were killed in "legal interventions," acts such as self-defense or police action.

Only 1 percent of all gun deaths are "legal interventions."

<sup>1</sup> Official government fatality statistics take two to three years to be released. The fatality statistics referenced in this document from 2010 were found at [cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars](http://cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars). Newer statistics can be found at that Web site, once they are available.

### Accidental deaths

In 2010, 606 people were killed through an accidental discharge of a firearm, and 114 of these were children and teens up to the age of 18.

Furthermore, 252 people die each year from firearm injuries with undetermined intent.

### A call to action

Thousands of lives could be saved each year by implementing smart and non-intrusive gun violence prevention laws that can strategically target places where legal guns are trafficked to illegal, underground markets. These laws would not threaten gun ownership for adults who have a legal right to own firearms. However, they would prevent many guns from falling into the hands of criminals and others who shouldn't use them.

### But what about the Second Amendment?

In June 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court released its verdict on the largest gun rights lawsuit in decades, *The District of Columbia v. Heller*. The Court ruled that the blanket ban on handgun ownership in Washington, D.C., violated the Second Amendment. The District had to allow Dick Heller, a security officer who uses a handgun on the job, to apply for a gun license for his home.

The *Heller* ruling was significant because it took a strong stance on a long-running constitutional question. Does the Second Amendment refer to an individual's right to bear arms or to a group right, guaranteed only for well-regulated militias? The Supreme Court decision, written

by Justice Antonin Scalia, unambiguously supported the "individual right" interpretation, arguing that a right to individual self-defense was assumed by the authors of the Constitution.

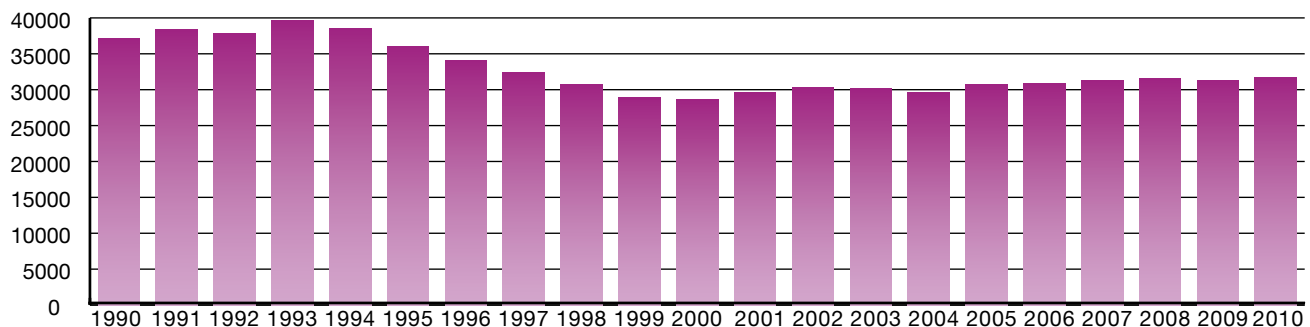
Nevertheless, the Supreme Court did not rule that all restrictions on guns were unconstitutional. Scalia specifically wrote, "The Court's opinion should not be taken to cast doubt on longstanding prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms."

Scalia also explicitly noted that the Court was not ruling on the legality of requiring the licensing of handguns in the District of Columbia.

*A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.*

U.S. Constitution,  
Second Amendment

### Deaths per Year



There are disagreements over this interpretation of the Second Amendment, but the Supreme Court's decision is now the legal precedent, and any advocacy directed at preventing gun deaths must account for the *Heller* ruling.

### How Can We Respond?

Effective advocacy to reduce gun violence should be focused, flexible and faithful.

#### Stay focused

Focus on preventing gun violence rather than the guns themselves.

The term “gun control” is intentionally left out of this guide. In order to reach a consensus on policies that can save lives, the main goal of gun violence advocacy should be to implement practical laws that will prevent gun deaths and injuries.

#### Stay flexible

Flexibility is required because laws that make sense for cities may not be appropriate in rural areas, towns and suburbs.

Advocates for gun violence prevention laws should acknowledge regional differences in gun usage and gun violence prevalence.

Nevertheless, many guns used on the streets of cities such as Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., were originally purchased in rural areas. Gun laws in one area can affect gun violence in others.

#### Stay faithful

Advocacy for gun violence prevention should focus on finding ways to reduce gun deaths and to faithfully guard God's gift of human life. It should not be about being right or wrong regarding any particular piece of gun legislation.

Because of our shared humanity, it is important to be honest about our own views concerning guns, and equally important to have the humility to listen to others' views.



Photo: Whalton/Wikimedia Commons

Recognizing and honoring both the similarities and differences between people can help defuse political impasses and produce pragmatic consensus. A faith reflection on Christian views of violence and nonviolence can be found in Section II of this folder: Christian Views on Violence and Self-Defense.

### Christian Advocacy:

The Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office promotes gun violence reduction policies that primarily attempt to prevent guns from reaching the hands of people who would use them criminally or irresponsibly.

#### Public policy

From accidental injuries to mass shootings, gun violence has reached epidemic proportions in the United States. Policy objectives for preventing gun violence should be comprehensive, combining efforts to stem the flow of firearms to illegal markets, implement universal background checks on gun sales and ban military-grade assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. These policy proposals are summarized below and explained more fully in Section III: Policy Solutions to Break a Deadly Cycle.

### Lost or stolen weapons

Firearms make their way to the underground market when peopled referred to as “straw purchasers” legally buy guns and illegally sell them to underground dealers. Straw purchasers can keep their records clean by claiming that the firearms they sold were lost or stolen.

Requiring sellers and buyers to report stolen or lost firearms or face liability for the gun’s harmful usage would dissuade straw purchasers from selling firearms on the underground market.

### Universal background checks

In contrast to sales by federally licensed dealers, background checks are not required for purchases through commercial markets such as online sites, gun shows and private sales. Implementing a universal background check will close these loopholes and ensure that only those who would use guns responsibly would have access to them.

### Banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines

Military-grade assault weapons and high-capacity magazines that can hold 30, 50, or even 100 rounds have been sold and used in the U.S. with few federal restrictions in place. Firepower of high-capacity magazines has little to no sporting or defense use, but it is often used in shootings which injure or kill many people in seconds before the shooter needs to reload. Although assault weapons are used in a small number of crimes involving firearms, they were often used in many of the most egregious cases, including the 2012 mass shootings in Aurora, Colo., and Newtown, Conn.

### Taking action

Once you’re ready to work toward reducing and preventing gun violence, you can find tips and strategies for effective advocacy in Section IV: Getting Involved and Taking Action.

#### Notes

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## Introduction

Christian advocacy for gun violence prevention is most effective when it is faithful to biblical and theological teachings about violence, and knowledgeable about the laws, politics and culture regarding guns and gun violence in the United States.

The other three sections of this guide focus mainly on the policy aspects of preventing gun violence. This section focuses on our beliefs and calling as Christians regarding violence and self-defense, which form the basis of our advocacy work.

This faith reflection provides:

- Differing Christian views of Jesus' teachings regarding turning the other cheek and loving enemies.
- Three New Testament passages used to justify violence, with alternative interpretations.
- Stories of nonviolent responses to violence and aggression.
- Concluding thoughts on Christian advocacy in a secular society.

### Respond

How do you feel about these interpretations of the passage? What do you think Jesus is saying?

Do you think violence is ever justified in self-defense or in defense of others? If so, why? If not, why not?

Do you think Jesus is urging passivity against violence, aggression or evil? If so, why would he do so? If not, what reaction to aggression do you think he promotes?

## Jesus Christ and the Sword

When Jesus lived, there were no firearms. However, violence was a daily reality in the ancient world.

As followers of Christ, it is appropriate to reflect on his teachings about violence and evaluate the way his words have been interpreted.

### Turning the “other cheek”

Two of the strongest, most direct statements of Jesus regarding violence and retaliation are found in the Sermon on the Mount.

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.

Matthew 5:38–40

The traditional Anabaptist interpretation of this passage takes Jesus' words at face value. Regardless of the actions taken against you, don't respond in kind. Put up no resistance at all. This straightforward understanding is a major argument—perhaps the main biblical argument—for Christian pacifism.

Another, recent interpretation is that Jesus recognized creative and effective ways of confronting evil other than responding in kind. In Christ's time the back of one's hand was used exclusively by “superiors” to punish persons of lower status, such as servants or slaves. When the abused turned the other cheek, the abuser had to use their palm for the second blow, thus raising the status of the abused.

A non-pacifist argument, included in traditional just war theory, is that Jesus' command applies only to self-defense, not defending others. If an aggressor targets you personally, don't resist. If an aggressor targets your neighbor, love them both, but come to the aid, violently if necessary, of the innocent.

A similar argument differentiates between individual and state action. Individuals should not use violence, but governments can if necessary. Individual agents of the state can use violence as ordered by their government.



## Loving your enemy

Another passage indirectly regarding violence comes a few verses later.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:43–45

In the Anabaptist tradition it is generally assumed that loving your enemy while committing violence against them is impossible. This conclusion leads to a pacifist position.

The main argument for the use of violence is that good intent can justify a necessary evil. Augustine argued that one could love an aggressor while participating in a violent action to defend innocent life. C.S. Lewis anecdotally summed up this position:

I have often thought to myself how it would have been if, when I served in the First World War, I and some young German had killed each other simultaneously and found ourselves together a moment after death. I cannot imagine that either of us would have felt any resentment or even any embarrassment. I think we might have laughed over it.

*Mere Christianity*, p. 107.

## New Testament Verses Used to Justify Violence

The following three passages are sometimes cited as Christian justifications for violence.

### Shouldn't we lay down our lives for our friends

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

John 15:13

This passage from the Gospel of John is used, especially in the context of just war theory, as a call to defend innocents. It is true that this verse is compatible with classic just war theory, but it is also compatible with pacifism, because there isn't a call to violent action in the passage. It does, however, suggest a willingness to resist violence, even at the cost of one's own life.

Jesus' life reinforces the argument for nonviolence. Christ's saving love came through his willingness to speak and act for justice and peace, eventually laying down his life at the cross, not through taking the lives of others.

### Respond

How does this passage speak to you? What do you make of the pacifist and non-pacifist arguments?

One of the fault lines in Christian ethics is the debate over whether taking another human life can ever be justified. Where do you come down on this question, and why?



Photo: Melissa Engle/MCC



## Didn't Jesus use violence to overturn the moneychangers' tables at the Temple?

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer', but you are making it a den of robbers."

Matthew 21:12–13

This story shows up in all four Gospels, and while the version in John notes that Jesus makes a "whip of cords," the passage implies that it was used to drive out the sheep and cattle. Jesus was forceful, overturning tables and chairs, but there is no indication that he used violence against any people in the temple. If anything, this passage seems more useful as a justification for "righteous anger," not violence against human beings.

## Didn't Jesus tell his disciples to buy swords?

[Jesus] said to them, "But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was counted among the lawless'; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled." They said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." He replied, "It is enough."

Luke 22:36–38

This passage is harder to interpret than the previous two, and New Testament scholars disagree over Jesus' purpose for acquiring swords. One explanation is that Jesus was urging his disciples to carry swords as a metaphor, to fulfill scripture. Another possibility is that Jesus was warning them to equip themselves for life on the road in the ancient world, swords and knives were not merely weapons but essential tools for outdoor survival.

In any case, Jesus' dismissal of his disciples' eagerness to supply weapons implies that the swords were not to be used for violence. Two swords for 12 disciples isn't sufficient for self-defense purposes, let alone for a violent uprising.

## Creative and Successful Nonviolence

The following are stories about regular people who were able to rebuff aggressors using nonviolent means.<sup>1</sup>

### Engaging the intruder

One night, Angie O'Gorman was suddenly awakened by a man who had entered her house and kicked open the door to her bedroom. Fear and panic rushed through her body.

Then a rare thought for one who is being victimized crossed her mind. She realized that whatever happened, both of them could suffer, or both could make it through this ordeal without serious damage.

She did something unexpected. She began to engage the intruder in simple conversation. "What time is it?" "How did you get in?" She quietly explained that she was not well-off financially and had very little in the way of material possessions. He said this also was true for him.

After some time she asked him to leave, but he said he was homeless and had nowhere to go. With amazing courage, she offered to let him spend the night in a room downstairs. He accepted. The next morning they ate breakfast together and he left.

### An assailant in the sanctuary

Tuyen Nguyen was attending a worship service at the Vietnamese Mennonite Church in Philadelphia when two men ran into the building, one chasing the other with a gun. Nguyen knew the first man couldn't escape, so he ran in between them, a nonviolent intervention that broke up the situation. The armed man pointed his gun at Nguyen for several seconds, then turned and walked away.

Later, the armed man returned peacefully to the church. He told Nguyen that the man he had chased was his father. Over time he became a Christian, was baptized and became a member of the Vietnamese Mennonite Church.

Nguyen said that he was able to remain peaceful and act as he did because he knew that God was in control. His personal responsibility as a Christian was to follow Christ's example, absorbing others violence into his own body.

<sup>1</sup> "The story summarized in "Engaging the intruder" originally appeared in "Defense Through Disarmament: Nonviolence and Personal Assault," in *The Universe Bends Towards Justice*, edited by Angie O'Gorman.

"An assailant in the sanctuary" is from an October 7, 2008 article, "God is in Control" in *The Mennonite*.

## The effectiveness of nonviolence

These individuals responded in kind, courageous and respectful nonviolence, not in fighting back or fearful submission. These actions surprised their would-be assailants. The nonviolent individuals acknowledged their shared humanity with the aggressors and gave them another way out of the situation.

These stories could have ended in tragedy. Nonviolent tactics are not guaranteed to work. But violent responses do not always work either, especially if the aggressor has the upper hand physically.

## Christian Advocacy in a Secular Society

Personal or group reflection on issues of violence and nonviolence will enhance your advocacy on gun violence issues. Strong faith convictions strengthen the impact of your witness to the state. Additionally, understanding the other's point of view on violence will help you to address their arguments.

The U.S. political system is pluralistic and based on secular, not religious, laws, but this fact should not water down a Christian message. It does force Christians to think creatively, searching for solutions that line up with both our values and our political system.

Section III: Solutions for Breaking a Deadly Cycle details policies that attempt to thread this needle.

### Notes

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### Suggestions for Further Reading

Many Christians have pondered the hard questions about violence and aggression and how Christians should respond. If you are interested in learning more, some suggestions include:

*Loving Enemies: A Manual for Ordinary People*, Randy and Joyce Klassen

*The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, Walter Wink

*Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance*, Glen H. Stassen

*A Peace Reader*, edited by E. Morris Sider and Luke Keefer Jr.

*Choosing Against War*, John D. Roth

*Just Policing, Not War*, Gerald W. Schlabach

*Thermostat: How Can We Turn Toward Peace in a Time of Fear?* A DVD and study guide, in English and Spanish, available from MCC through [resources.mcc.org](http://resources.mcc.org).

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## Introduction

Our shared humanity compels us to care about God's children dying from gun violence on the streets of Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles and elsewhere.

Our shared laws connect us all to their tragic deaths.

This public policy analysis provides:

- An overview of the route that many firearms take from legal purchase in gun shops to illegal purchase on the underground market.
- Policy proposals to stop the trafficking of guns to people who would use them for harmful purposes and to limit the civilian use of military-grade assault weapons, while protecting the Second Amendment rights of hunters, sportsmen and others who use guns responsibly.

## Making Connections

When you and your loved ones are not threatened by violence, it is possible to feel disconnected from the people who are. It is easy to feel insulated from violence that affects others.

Yet we're more connected than we realize, and laws in one area can have far-reaching effects in other places. A tragic example of this is handgun trafficking in Pennsylvania—a result of inadequate gun laws in the state.

## Case study: Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania is “a favorite source of gun traffickers,” according to a March 2008 story in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. “Straw purchases”—purchasing guns to give or sell to others—are “exceptionally easy” in the state.<sup>1</sup>

Thousands of guns originally purchased in Pennsylvania are used in crimes within the state, as well as exported and used in crimes in surrounding states. In 2006, investigators traced 332 crime guns in New Jersey and 461 in New York back to Pennsylvania gun shops.

Pennsylvania is not alone. Other states, including Georgia, Ohio, Florida and Texas, maintain gun sale policies that unintentionally promote illegal gun trafficking. A state-by-state breakdown of active gun violence prevention laws is available at the Legal Community Against Violence Web site: [lcav.org](http://lcav.org).



ex.libris/Flickr <http://flickr.com/photos/exlibris/281448529/>

Enforcing current gun laws is also important. Approximately 40 percent of all guns connected with crime nationwide originate at less than 1 percent of the 100,000 gun shops operating in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

A gun violence prevention strategy that includes the introduction of smart laws to target straw purchasers along with better enforcement of current anti-trafficking laws will make illegal weapons sales more difficult, less profitable and less prevalent.

<sup>1</sup> “A Favorite Source of Gun Traffickers”, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 23, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> “A small number of gun shops account for a large number of weapons used in crimes”, *The Associated Press*, July 12, 2007.

## Straw purchases

The diagram below provides a brief overview of how the straw purchasing cycle works.

The straw purchasing cycle is the most common way that guns are trafficked and sold to individuals who are restricted from owning them. According to a 2000 report, “nearly 50 percent of ATF (Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) investigations involved firearms being trafficked by straw purchasers either directly or indirectly.”<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, states with lenient gun-purchasing laws, such as Pennsylvania, are directly connected to the gun violence that occurs in other states.

It also suggests that making small changes to block the straw purchasing cycle could save hundreds—or thousands—of lives each year.

<sup>3</sup> *Following the Gun: Enforcing Federal Laws against Firearms Traffickers*, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, June 2000.

## Ending the cycle of gun violence

Ending gun violence requires effective policies to prevent straw purchasers from trafficking guns to the underground market, gun purchasers from accessing guns without background checks, and assault weapons and high-capacity magazines from being purchased and used for civilian use.

### Policy I: Require that gun owners report “lost or stolen” firearms

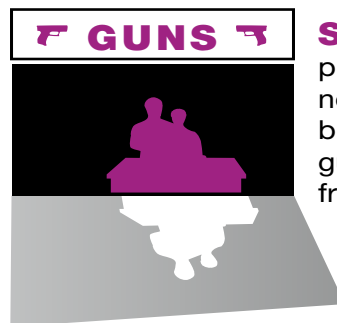
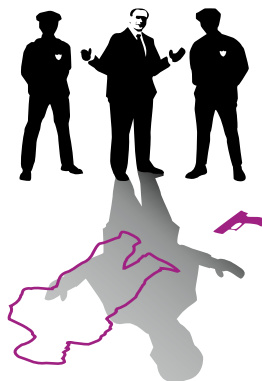
“Virtually every crime gun in the United States starts off as a legal firearm,” writes Bradley A. Buckles, former director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in *Following the Gun*. This means that in almost every case, illegal guns used in crimes are transferred from someone who is constitutionally entitled to possess firearms to someone who is not.

This transfer constitutes a federal felony, but straw purchasers can often avoid prosecution by claiming that the guns they sold to underground dealers were lost or stolen.

An easy way to target straw dealers is to implement policies

## Straw purchasing

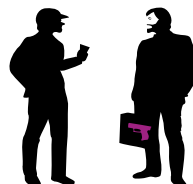
**Step 4** When guns used in a crime are traced back to a straw purchaser, they claim the guns were lost or stolen. In some states, this gets them off the hook and able to continue supplying guns to the underground market.



**Step 1** The straw purchaser, a person with no criminal record, legally buys a large number of guns, usually handguns, from a gun shop.



**Step 2** The straw purchaser sells the guns to an underground market dealer for a profit.



**Step 3** The underground market dealer sells the guns to people who are unable to buy the weapons legally. These guns are often used in crimes. “Dirty” guns are then often resold to juveniles for as little as \$50.

requiring legal gun owners to report lost or stolen guns within 24 hours of discovery and hold them accountable if unreported guns are used in a crime. Because they would earn criminal convictions for selling their legally purchased guns to underground dealers, straw purchasers would be unable to buy more guns in the future.

“Lost or stolen” laws do not place an undue burden on responsible gun owners who willingly report the actual theft of their weapons. These laws do, however, remove the easiest excuse straw purchasers can use to avoid prosecution for their crimes.

## **Policy II: Require universal background checks for gun sales**

Once unlicensed dealers receive guns from straw purchasers, they can sell these guns without requiring their customers’ records to be examined through the FBI’s National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). These gun sales are often done in private marketplaces such as online sites, classified advertisements and gun shows. While exact numbers are hard to come by, some have estimated that unchecked gun purchases comprise approximately 40 percent of total gun sales in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Implementing universal background checks is an effective and nonintrusive way to make it more likely that guns will not be accessible to people who would use them for harm. Since NICS started operating in 1998, background checks have denied 2.1 million gun purchases that could have been used for violent intent,<sup>5</sup> while allowing gun sales to people who wish to use them for hunting, sportsmanship or other responsible purposes. A Gallup survey in 2013 showed that 91 percent of Americans support universal background checks on gun sales.<sup>6</sup>

## **Policy III: Reauthorizing and strengthening an assault weapons ban**

In 1994, Congress nearly unanimously passed a 10-year ban on the civilian sale of military-grade assault weapons in the United States. This law banned specific weapons, such as semi-automatic AK-47s, Uzis and TEC-9s, as well as other rifles, handguns and shotguns that include two or more assault features including bayonet mounts, grenade launchers and pistol grips for non-pistols. The law expired in 2004 and has not been reinstated.

While assault weapons and high-capacity magazines are not used extensively in crimes involving firearms, cases that

involved these firearms and elements are much more fatal.

Furthermore, although the 1994 Federal Assault Weapons Ban was a step to reduce gun violence, many critics have argued that it still allowed many loopholes. For instance, military-grade assault weapons could still be sold as long as they had undergone cosmetic changes to exempt these weapons out of the “assault weapons” category. Assault weapons produced prior to the enactment of the law also continued to be sold to the public. Thus, not only should the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban be reauthorized, but the law needs to be expanded.

In 2013 federal lawmakers proposed to reauthorize and strengthen the expired assault weapons ban and to limit ammunition magazines to 10 rounds, but these proposals failed to pass in Congress.

## **Other Gun Violence Prevention Laws**

Gun violence in the U.S. is a huge problem with many factors contributing to the deadly cycle. Some people have argued that more funding is needed for mental health services. Such funding is important and necessary and should be provided in conjunction with comprehensive gun safety laws.

### **Limit handgun sales to one per month**

Handguns make their way to the underground market when straw purchasers legally buy guns and illegally sell them to underground dealers. However, this system is only profitable when straw purchasers sell large numbers of guns at a time.

Because few people need to buy more than 12 handguns per year, a one handgun per month policy would be a non-intrusive way to limit the flow of guns to the underground market.

As of 2013, three states (California, Maryland and New Jersey) and the District of Columbia have active “one handgun per month” laws.

<sup>4</sup> *Guns in America: National Survey on Private Ownership and Use of Firearms*, National Institute of Justice, May 1997.

<sup>5</sup> *Background Checks for Firearm Transfers, 2010: Statistical Tables*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Department of Justice.

<sup>6</sup> Gallup Poll, January 2013





### Introduction

Gun violence is not a regional or urban issue.

Reducing and preventing gun violence will require political action from national and state policymakers, though some regions, cities and neighborhoods are more immediately affected than others.

Strong constituency advocacy forces them to act.

This guide to action provides:

- Suggestions for effective legislative advocacy.
- Instructions for finding the contact information for the policymakers who represent you.
- A sample letter to Congress about “lost or stolen” laws.

### Contacting Your Legislators

You can contact your legislators in many ways: personal visits, letters, faxes, emails and phone calls. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, and some methods are more appropriate and effective than others in certain situations.

#### Personal visits

As a general rule, making a visit to your legislator’s office, whether district, state or national, is the most effective and meaningful way to influence the men and women who represent you.

If you become a frequent citizen advocate and build a reputation for supplying legitimate concerns and information, the office may consider you as a go-to person concerning the issues you care about.

But even a one-time visit can make an important impact on your legislator’s decisions.

#### Tips for visits:

- **Schedule in advance** It is usually best to schedule an appointment two to four weeks in advance. If you are trying to meet with your legislator instead of a staff member, be as flexible as possible.
- **Pick the venue** Your legislator’s office in Washington, D.C., or the state capitol is usually the best place to go to talk about issues of policy such as gun violence prevention laws. However, direct meetings with your national legislators, as opposed to staff members, is more likely to occur in their local offices, especially when Congress is in recess.



Photo: Denny Mason/MCC

- **Prepare in advance** Research your legislator’s views about gun violence and the status of current legislation in order to craft your advocacy pitch. Has a bill been introduced? Where is it in the legislative process?
- **Go as a group** Visiting a policymaker can be intimidating, especially if it is your first time. Going as a group can help take some of the individual pressure off and allow each person to speak to her or his own strengths. Staff members are more likely to be influenced by several people than one individual alone.
- **Have a discussion and ask questions** Legislators and staff members are more likely to remember and value two-way dialogue. Feel free to express honest and respectful disagreements, but seek areas of agreement, even on issues where you may differ overall.
- **Don’t overreach** If asked a question you can’t answer, be honest and tell the legislator or staff member that you will find the answer and send it later. This increases your credibility, and may help you form a long-term relationship with the office.
- **Leave materials** Providing materials—such as an outline of your requests or a policy brief about gun violence prevention strategies—gives the legislator or staff member resources they can consult after the meeting.
- **Follow up** Be sure to send a thank you note, either by email or post. In it you can include answers to any questions that were raised during the meeting. It is also appropriate to reiterate your policy requests, as well as your understanding of what, if anything, the legislator or staff member agreed to do during the meeting.



### Letters, faxes and e-mails

Written correspondence with policymakers can be another effective way to share your concerns and appreciation regarding their legislative positions and votes.

Legible, hand-written notes are usually considered the most meaningful and highly regarded form of correspondence. Personalized, typed letters are also respected. Unfortunately, because of postal delays and security concerns, especially at the national level, postal letters are not as useful when immediate action is needed.

Faxes and emails—unless directly sent to legislative contacts with whom you already have a relationship—are taken less seriously, especially if they are petitions or form letters. However, because they are received immediately, they are better suited to urgent advocacy.

### Tips for letter writing

- **Be brief** Try to limit yourself to a page or two at most. The more concise the letter, the more likely it will be read thoroughly.
- **Be clear** Explicitly state what you would like your policymaker to do. Asking her or him to co-sponsor, support or oppose a specific policy or piece of legislation is better than a general request, such as “oppose gun violence.”
- **Stick to one topic** Don’t write about gun violence *and* military policy *and* taxes. Do justice to one issue.
- **State your reasoning** Be honest about why you care about the topic; give your specific reason.
- **Ask a question** A well-written question can raise a point and stimulate a personal response.
- **Write as a group** Policymakers and their staff members will take gun violence prevention more seriously if they receive a number of letters about the issue. Hosting a letter-writing event after church or during Sunday school can be a fun and effective way to write as a group. Multiple letters by different authors are more effective than a single letter signed by multiple persons.
- **Include your name and address** Legislative offices want to know that you live in their district and may disregard letters if they are unsure. Your policymaker will usually send a response if he or she knows where to send it.

### Sample Letter

This is a template about “lost or stolen” laws that you can modify and personalize for your purposes. The same overall format would also apply to letters about other gun violence prevention policies, such as “universal background checks for gun sales.”

Dear [Senator/Representative] \_\_\_\_\_

I am writing to you because I am deeply concerned about the level of gun violence in [your state/the United States].

[If you have a personal story about witnessing or being affected by gun violence, include it here if you feel comfortable. Highlighting a local or national gun violence news story is also a great way to begin your letter. You may want to cite some of the statistics from this guide.]

The former director of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, Bradley A. Buckles, stated that, “virtually every crime gun in the United States starts off as a legal firearm...identified by a serial number and required documentation.” This means that many of the guns on the underground market were purchased by legal, straw buyers at gun shops and then sold to unlicensed dealers. Action must be taken to prevent this illegal trafficking.

“Lost or stolen” laws [if you know legislation is pending, you should name the bill number here] will help hold straw buyers accountable when the guns they sell to underground market dealers end up being used in crimes. Straw buyers often use the excuse that crime weapons were lost or stolen, allowing them in many cases to avoid weapon trafficking charges. Requiring gun owners to report within 24 hours of discovery when their weapons are lost or stolen would allow them to avoid accusations of straw purchasing while holding straw purchasers legally responsible. This would prevent straw purchasers from selling more guns in the future.

Please support passage of a “lost or stolen” law [again, include the bill number if you know it] to help reduce the tragic number of handgun deaths that occur in [your state/the United States] each year.

Sincerely,



## Phone calls

When urgent advocacy is needed—for example, if the legislature will vote on a gun violence prevention bill in the next 24 hours—phone calls can be the most effective way to express your views quickly. Unlike letters, which are usually read individually by the legislator or a staff member, phone calls are often sent to voicemail and tallied up into groups of “for” and “against.” While this can seem impersonal and less meaningful, the outcome of these tallies can have a huge impact on legislators’ votes.

## Tips for making calls

- **Call the office in Washington, D.C., or your state capitol** Unless you have a personal contact at a local office, it is better to call your legislator’s main policy office.
- **Introduce yourself** State where you live so the office knows you are a constituent. If you talk to a staff member, write down her or his name for a potential follow-up letter.
- **Be succinct** Your message should be brief. State support or opposition for a position or piece of legislation, along with a question about the legislator’s stance on the issue. Your phone conversation or message should take only a minute or two.

## Conclusion

Gun violence is a big problem. Passing effective legislation to reduce and prevent it will take time and dedication. Whether you write one letter to your representative or become a regular visitor to your legislators’ offices, your advocacy can make a huge difference.

The MCC U.S. Washington Office would be grateful for copies of your written correspondences and any responses you receive, as well as information about other forms of congressional communication, such as phone calls and visits. Please send them to [mccwash@mcc.org](mailto:mccwash@mcc.org) or 920 Pennsylvania Ave. SE, Washington, D.C., 20003.

## Finding Contact Info

### National Legislators:

The easiest way to find the contact information for your national legislators is to visit their official websites. You can find links at: **senate.gov** Selecting your state from the scroll-down menu will provide links to your senators.

**house.gov** Typing your ZIP code in the supplied box will provide the link to your representative.

If you know the names of your legislators, you can mail letters to:

Senator \_\_\_\_\_,  
United States Senate,  
Washington DC 20510

or

Representative \_\_\_\_\_,  
U.S. House of Representatives,  
Washington DC 20515

### State Legislators:

Finding your state legislators can be trickier because states do not conform to the same Web site naming conventions. You should be able to find the Web pages of your state legislative body by using an Internet search engine and looking up: [Your State] Senate or [Your State] House or [Your State] Assembly.

Most state legislature Web sites include a representative search feature.

## Internet Information

Legal Community Against Violence; [lcav.org](http://lcav.org)

Coalition to Stop Gun Violence; [csgv.org](http://csgv.org)

Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence; [bradycampaign.org](http://bradycampaign.org)

States United to Prevent Gun Violence; [supgv.org](http://supgv.org)

