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Working to Prevent Gun Violence in the United States: The Role of Policy & Advocacy

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**Working to Prevent Gun Violence in the United States:
The Role of Policy & Advocacy**

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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In
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Abstract:

There are several laws in place regarding the legal purchase and possession of firearms in the United States (Giffords Law Center, 2020). There are also laws regarding the prohibited purchase and possession of firearms (Giffords Law Center, 2020). Yet, prohibited persons purchase and possess firearms regularly (Giffords Law Center, 2020). This happens because there are loopholes in the law (Brady United, 2020). For example, federal law requires background checks for gun purchases from licensed firearm dealers, but not at gun shows where sellers may not be licensed. This means that a felon (prohibited purchaser and possessor) buying a gun from a gun show that doesn't require a background check is a loophole in the background check law. The felon gets the gun despite the prohibition because there is no background check required in this setting. (Giffords Law Center, 2020). The consequences to these loopholes are that prohibited persons have access to firearms. Many times, these guns are used in crimes (Giffords Law Center, 2020).

This study analyzed how prohibited persons obtain firearms and explored effective policies to prevent the prohibited purchase and possession of firearms in the United States, with the intention of gaining insight on how to reduce gun violence in America.

This thesis asked the following research question: what policy strategies are effective in preventing the prohibited purchase and possession of firearms? Using interviews with individuals involved with proposing and writing laws as well as those looking to build political will for action, this study examined both policy and advocacy strategies. This study found that there are a total of five effective policy strategies to prevent gun violence in America: giving

states and local governments the authority to regulate this issue; using incrementalism and/or the foot-in-the-door-technique; getting youth involved; establishing a standard definition for reporting systems; and the need for additional research.

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I. Introduction

One hundred Americans are killed with firearms every day.¹ Of the 36,383 Americans who died from gun violence in 2018, 22,274 (61%) were gun suicides, 12,830 (35%) were gun homicides, and an additional 3.5% were unintentional shootings.² This means that for every 100,000 people living in the United States, 12.2% will die due to firearms.³ Determining the number of individuals living in the U.S. who are affected by gun violence, be it themselves or a secondhand experience, is nearly impossible.

Firearm ownership in the United States is a topic that has remained very controversial for many years, most especially in the recent past, due to increasing rates of gun violence and mortality. Regardless of where individuals stand politically on the issue, there are three main reasons that gun violence is prevalent and should be concerning to every individual living in the United States.

First, research shows that rates of gun violence have an increasing historical trend.⁴ In 2017, gun deaths reached their highest in the last 40 years.⁵ Gun violence increased by 16% from 2014-2017 and gun homicides by 30% in the same time span.⁶ From 2003-2007, roughly 33 Americans per day were murdered with guns.⁷ Each year from 2005-2010, an average of 103,000 Americans were injured or killed by a firearm -- approximately 282 individuals per day.⁸

¹ Giffords Law Center, Gun Violence Statistics 2020, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

² Everytown for Gun Safety 2020, <https://everytown.org/>.

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/firearm_mortality/firearm.htm.

⁴ Giffords Law Center, Facts about Gun Violence, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

⁵ Giffords Law Center, Gun Violence Statistics 2020, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

⁶ Giffords Law Center, Gun Violence Statistics 2020, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

⁷ David Hemenway, "Risks and Benefits of a Gun in the Home," *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* 5, no. 6 (February 2, 2011): 502-511. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1559827610396294>.

⁸ Joseph Simonetti, Ali Rowhani-Rahbar, Brianna Mills, Bessie Young, and Frederick P. Rivara, "State Firearm Legislation and Nonfatal Firearm Injuries," *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 8 (January 24, 2015): 1703-1709. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302617>.

In 2018, the Centers for Disease Control and Preventions (CDC) listed the third leading cause of death in the United States to be unintentional injuries and accidents.⁹ During this same year, nearly 170,000 Americans died due to such events, while an additional 47,173 individuals died to the tenth leading cause of death, being intentional self harm/suicide.¹⁰ Within both categories of unintentional injuries and intentional self harm, roughly 36,000 of these incidents are firearms related deaths.¹¹ In 2016, this number rose to 38,000 deaths, and increased again in 2017, with roughly 40,000 deaths by firearms.¹² This past year alone, the United States set new records for the number of deaths due to mass shootings, suicide by guns, and “willfill, malicious, or accidental” injuries to teens aged 12-17.¹³ Unfortunately, it seems that the only way school shootings and gun violence among youth will decrease is when schools themselves are shut down. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, March 2020 was the first March without a school shooting since 2002.¹⁴ Through analyzing statistics and annual trends of gun violence, it is clear to see that rates of firearm injuries and death remain as high as ever, with increasing trends nearly every year.¹⁵

Second, in comparison to other developed countries, the United States has exceptionally high rates of gun violence.¹⁶ In fact, Americans are 25 times more likely to be killed in a gun

⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/firearm_mortality/firearm.htm.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Sophie Lewis, “March 2020 was the first March without a school shooting in the U.S. since 2002,” *CBS News* (April 14, 2020), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-first-march-without-school-shooting-since-2002-united-states/>.

¹⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/firearm_mortality/firearm.htm.

¹⁶ Giffords Law Center, Facts about Gun Violence, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

homicide than residents of other high income countries.¹⁷ The United States accounts for just 4% of the world's population but 35% of global firearm suicides and 9% of global firearm homicides.¹⁸ Women in the United States are 21 times more likely to be murdered with a gun than women in peer countries.¹⁹ Americans are 10 times more likely to die by gun suicide than people in peer countries.²⁰ Children aged 5 to 14 years in the United States have 11 times the likelihood of being killed accidentally with a gun compared with similarly aged children in other developed countries.²¹ “Americans have more private guns per capita, and particularly more handguns, than citizens of other developed countries.”²² Currently, more than one third of households in the United States contain a working firearm; slightly fewer than half of American men and 10% of women are firearm owners.²³ There is immense differentiation amongst countries similar to the U.S. and the U.S. itself, when it comes to gun violence. The United States has been in this unenviable position for at least the past decade.²⁴

Lastly, gun violence poses huge economical costs and social burdens to our country.²⁵ Data shows that findings have implications beyond the physical and psychological impact of firearm injuries on survivors.²⁶ Researchers estimate that gun violence costs the American

¹⁷ Giffords Law Center, Facts about Gun Violence, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

¹⁸ Giffords Law Center, Facts about Gun Violence, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

¹⁹ Giffords Law Center, Facts about Gun Violence, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

²⁰ Giffords Law Center, Facts about Gun Violence, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

²¹ David Hemenway, “Risks and Benefits of a Gun in the Home,” *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* 5, no. 6 (February 2, 2011): 502-511, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1559827610396294>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Joseph Simonetti, Ali Rowhani-Rahbar, Brianna Mills, Bessie Young, and Frederick P. Rivara, “State Firearm Legislation and Nonfatal Firearm Injuries,” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 8 (January 24, 2015): 1703-1709. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302617>.

²⁶ Joseph Simonetti, Ali Rowhani-Rahbar, Brianna Mills, Bessie Young, and Frederick P. Rivara, “State Firearm Legislation and Nonfatal Firearm Injuries,” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 8 (January 24, 2015): 1703-1709. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302617>.

economy at least \$229 billion every year, including \$8.6 billion in direct expenses.²⁷ Most of this financial burden falls directly onto taxpayers, via costs aimed toward Medicare, Medicaid, and the uninsured.²⁸ A Minneapolis study found that just one fewer gun homicide was associated with the creation of 80 jobs.²⁹ With additional jobs and eliminated financial burden, the United States economy would only benefit.

These reasons not only show the relevance of this issue to every American, but also that gun violence is a public health problem and must be analyzed through such a lens, in order to halt the continuing trend. Oftentimes, individuals look to blame mentally ill individuals for publicized gun violence. When the need for limitations and policies is mentioned, many run to placing the burden solely on mental health practitioners to prevent such individuals from getting access to firearms. “While mental health practitioners' role may need to be considered in this issue, the responsibility very much also lies with the public, policymakers, and public health practitioners to address the social, structural, and psychological implications of gun violence.”³⁰

But why? What makes public health a good collaborator for this policy issue? Why is it necessary to analyze gun violence through a public health lens?

Public health has the ability to address risk factors. Policymakers should rely on public health research to make legislative decisions regarding this issue. Without the necessary public health research, gun violence cannot be adequately addressed and resolved. The responsibility of

²⁷ Giffords Law Center, Facts about Gun Violence, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

²⁸ Joseph Simonetti, Ali Rowhani-Rahbar, Brianna Mills, Bessie Young, and Frederick P. Rivara, “State Firearm Legislation and Nonfatal Firearm Injuries,” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 8 (January 24, 2015): 1703-1709. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302617>.

²⁹ Giffords Law Center, Facts about Gun Violence, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

³⁰ Jonathan M. Metz and Kenneth T. MacLeis, “Mental Illness, Mass Shootings, and the Politics of American Firearms,” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 2 (February 2015): 1-10, https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/3ac5/cf87e0f1bcde40b290e80d6f31e26837f34f.pdf?_ga=2.228602972.1194621102.1588612846-529183348.1588612846.

resolving America’s gun violence problem does not fall only on some. It will take many coming together to collaborate on effective policy solutions.

There are currently numerous recommendations to reduce gun violence in America. One is through establishing policies about prohibited purchase and possession, which is what this paper is focusing on specifically. This contributes to only a small part of the overall problem and is not the only solution. However, it is a great place to start to enforce meaningful change and work to reduce gun violence. For example, “Background-check policies work at the population level to prevent firearm purchases by felons, people convicted of certain violent misdemeanors, and others who are at increased risk for violent behavior. Using background checks to prevent such persons from acquiring firearms is associated with a reduction of at least 25% in their incidence of arrest for a firearm-related or other violent crime.”³¹ Therefore, expanding certain categories of prohibited persons would improve the background check system and make it more difficult for high risk individuals to obtain firearms, which will have a lasting effect on gun violence rates in America.³² This is obvious when examining past instances of gun violence attacks.

The Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooter, a former student at the school, had made credible threats of violence against schools and students for years, during which time he *legally* purchased the AR-15–style rifle that he used on Valentine’s Day.³³ Perhaps most important is that information that would prohibit high-risk people from purchasing firearms is

³¹ Garen J. Wintemute, “How to Stop Mass Shootings,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 373, no. 13 (September 27, 2018): 1-4, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1807277>.

³² Giffords Law Center, Facts about Gun Violence, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

³³ Garen J. Wintemute, “How to Stop Mass Shootings,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 373, no. 13 (September 27, 2018): 1-4, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1807277>.

frequently -- many thousands of times per year -- not reported.³⁴ For example, 25 people, one of whom was pregnant, were killed and another 20 wounded at the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas. The shooter had been convicted of domestic violence while in the Air Force, but the Air Force had failed to report that event. Because of the conviction, the shooter should have been prohibited from purchasing firearms. But because the conviction was not reported, he passed background checks and purchased four firearms, including the AR-15–style rifle used in the church, from federally licensed dealers.³⁵

What will it take to limit such persons’ access to firearms? Research shows both policy and advocacy. This paper seeks to answer the following question: what policy strategies are effective in preventing the prohibited purchase and possession of firearms? This paper discusses federal and state law, and its differences in addressing gun violence, before defining and acknowledging who “prohibited persons” entails. Through analyzing current literature in the field of gun violence and its prevention, this paper acknowledges the findings of past research before describing the argument of this paper, what it aims to answer, as well as its impacts and implications. This paper includes the methodology of the study in using both narrative and content analysis, as well as the findings and analysis, which were answered through informational interviews with legislative staffers, gun advocacy organizations, individuals affected by gun violence, and current public health researchers in the field. The findings of this paper makes recommendations for future research and strategies that could be used to reduce gun violence in America.

³⁴ Garen J. Wintemute, “How to Stop Mass Shootings,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 373, no. 13 (September 27, 2018): 1-4, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1807277>.

³⁵ Ibid.

II. Background

In order to understand the entirety of the issue, it is necessary to define who exactly, “prohibited persons, possession, and purchase,” entails. In analyzing the research, it is clear to see that there is no simple definition, as the term varies from state to state and at the federal level.

As defined by Federal Code, the following persons are prohibited from possessing firearms:³⁶

- A fugitive from justice;
- Narcotic drug addicts including persons who use marijuana legally under state law, as defined by the ATF;
- Persons under the age of 18;
- Persons convicted of a domestic violence misdemeanor;
- Persons dishonorably discharged from the military;
- Persons unlawfully in the U.S. or admitted under a nonimmigrant visa;
- Persons convicted of a crime punishable by 1+ year of imprisonment;
- Persons who suffer from mental illness;
- Persons who have renounced their U.S. citizenship; and
- Persons subject to a court restraining from harassment, stalking, or threats.

In addition, California Code deems the following persons are prohibited from possessing firearms (Pen. Code, §§ 29800-29825, 29900; Welf . & Inst . Code, §§ 8100, 8103):³⁷

- Convicted felons;

³⁶<https://lawcenter.giffords.org/gun-laws/policy-areas/who-can-have-a-gun/categories-of-prohibited-people/#federal>.

³⁷ <https://oag.ca.gov/sites/all/files/agweb/pdfs/firearms/pdf/cfl2016.pdf>.

- Narcotic drug addicts;
- Persons with 2 or more convictions under Penal Code 417 (California’s law against brandishing a weapon);
- Persons convicted of certain misdemeanor offenses;
- Persons who suffer from mental illness (people placed on two involuntary psychiatric holds in a year get a lifetime gun ban); and
- People under 18 (people under 21 may not purchase a gun).

The federal categories of prohibited purchasers are the prevailing minimum for all states.

³⁸ States may adopt laws prohibiting additional persons from purchasing and/or possessing firearms.³⁹ Most states incorporate at least some classes of federally prohibited purchasers into their state laws so that they may prosecute violators.⁴⁰ This is important because the vast majority of criminal prosecutions occur at the state level.⁴¹

Other substantial built-in barriers exist.⁴² “Classes of people who are prohibited from purchasing firearms are defined vaguely and anachronistically under U.S. law; ‘adjudicated as a mental defective or committed to a mental institution’ and ‘unlawful user of or addicted to any controlled substance’ are good examples.”⁴³ Unsurprisingly, there can be serious ambiguity about whether a specific event is in fact prohibiting. The definition’s differentiation among all

³⁸ <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/gun-laws/policy-areas/who-can-have-a-gun/categories-of-prohibited-people/#federal>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Garen J. Wintemute, “How to Stop Mass Shootings,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 373, no. 13 (September 27, 2018): 1-4, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1807277>.

⁴³ Garen J. Wintemute, “How to Stop Mass Shootings,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 373, no. 13 (September 27, 2018): 1-4, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1807277>.

states and the federal government consequently creates discrepancies that allow prohibited individuals to access firearms regardless of their state's law.

These discrepancies exist due to federalism, and due to the nature of federalism, will likely always exist on some scale. Federalism provides power to both the states and the national government, as well as autonomy to states to make their own laws, as long as these laws do not directly conflict with federal laws. In the case of defining who “prohibited persons and possessors” entails, federal law could be a way to get all states to have the same definition, which would only aid in the case of gun violence by establishing additional clarity and accountability within the system. This begs the question, in acknowledging the differences between state and federal government, who does “prohibited persons” entail? What does this discrepancy mean in the case of gun violence?

Despite both federal and state laws, prohibited persons still get access to firearms through gun shows, straw purchasing, friends and family, the black market, and theft, among other methods.⁴⁴ Important information that would prohibit purchase and possession of firearms often goes unreported, ultimately due to the discrepancies between state and federal law.⁴⁵ It is necessary to find effective solutions, including reasonable measures to limit these discrepancies, to reduce the access for a prohibited person from obtaining a firearm. A great place to start in finding effective solutions to reduce gun violence is through conclusive public health research.

⁴⁴ Garen J. Wintemute, “How to Stop Mass Shootings,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 373, no. 13 (September 27, 2018): 1-4, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1807277>.

⁴⁵ Garen J. Wintemute, “How to Stop Mass Shootings,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 373, no. 13 (September 27, 2018): 1-4, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1807277>.

III. Literature Review

There is current peer-reviewed research that provides context and details about the effects of firearms in America and its connection to gun violence. In this paper, seven pieces of literature are highlighted to show some of the most relevant research and findings about gun ownership and violence.

A 1993 study by Kellermann et. al researched whether gun ownership is a risk factor for homicide in the home. Through analyzing 1,860 homicides among three metropolitan counties, researchers were able to determine that there is a positive correlation between keeping a gun in the home and an increased risk of homicide by family members or intimate acquaintances. The study also found that having a gun in the home increases homicide risk, rather than increases protection, like many assume and argue.⁴⁶ While this study is from nearly 20 years ago, additional research has supported the accuracy of this study.

Another study analyzed the relationship between gun ownership and firearm homicide rates in all 50 states, over a 30 year time span (1981-2010). The purpose of this study was to determine if owning and possessing a firearm inside a house had an effect on homicide rates. Researchers found a “robust” relationship between higher levels of gun ownership and higher firearm homicide rates. The study found that there is a relationship between higher levels of gun ownership and higher firearm homicide rates, not just within a home. Author Michael Siegel stated in the paper that, “understanding the relationship between the prevalence of gun ownership (and therefore the availability of guns) and firearm-related mortality is critical to guiding

⁴⁶ Arthur L. Kellermann, Frederick P. Rivara, Norman B. Rushforth, Joyce G. Banton, Donald T. Reay, Jerry T. Francisco, Ana B. Locci, Janic Prodzinski, Bela B. Hackman, and Some, Grant, “Gun Ownership as a Risk Factor for Homicide in the Home,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* (October 7, 1993): 1-9, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/pdf/10.1056/NEJM199310073291506>.

decisions regarding recently proposed measures to address firearm violence.”⁴⁷ After analyzing both studies, it should be no surprise that researchers were able to make the following conclusions.

For most contemporary Americans the health risk of a gun in the home is greater than the benefit; there are no credible studies that indicate otherwise.⁴⁸ In fact, “the possibility of using a gun in a socially useful manner will occur, for the average person, 0 times, or perhaps once in a lifetime,” researcher David Hemenway found.⁴⁹ Many times, pro-gun individuals argue the safety that owning and possessing a firearm provides. However, this study found that in the case of household gun ownership, the risk for injury, suicide, accidental death, as well as burglary are significantly increased, showing that there isn’t a real tremendous benefit to the average American owner and that the health risk of a gun in the home is greater than the benefit.⁵⁰

It has been found that “in states with more guns, there were more suicides (because there were more firearm suicides), even after controlling for the percentage of the state’s population with serious mental illnesses, alcohol dependence or abuse, illicit substance dependence or abuse, and the percentage unemployed, living below the poverty level, and in urban areas.”⁵¹ For example, The American Association of Suicidology stated, “there is a positive association between the accessibility and availability of firearms in the home and the risk of youth suicide; guns in the home, particularly loaded guns, are associated with increased risk for suicide by

⁴⁷ Michael Siegel, Craig S. Ross, and Charles King, “The Relationship Between Gun Ownership and Firearm Homicide Rates in the United States, 1981-2010.” *American Journal of Public Health* 103, no. 11 pp. 1, (November 13, 2013): 2098-2103, <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdf/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301409>.

⁴⁸ David Hemenway, “Risks and Benefits of a Gun in the Home,” *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* 5, no. 6 (February 2, 2011): 502-511. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1559827610396294>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

youth, both with and without identifiable mental health problems or suicidal risk factors. When 34 injury prevention experts were asked to prioritize home injury hazards for young children, based on frequency, severity, and preventability of the injury, the experts rated access to firearms in the home as the most significant hazard.”⁵²

The study also found that, “there are more accidental gun deaths in areas with more guns. According to the CDC data, between 2003 and 2007, the typical resident from the 15 states with the most guns was 6 times more likely to die in a gun accident than a typical resident from the 6 states with the fewest guns.”⁵³ Hand in hand with this information Hemenway found that, “in states and counties with higher levels of household gun ownership, there were actually more burglaries, and there were more burglaries when someone was at home, not less.”⁵⁴

A 2013 study assessed gun ownership rates across the United States and found a strong association between exposure to a social gun culture and gun ownership.⁵⁵ In 2013, one third of Americans reported owning a gun, ranging from 5.2% in Delaware to 61.7% in Alaska.⁵⁶ Gun ownership was 2.25 times greater among those reporting “exposure to” social gun culture than those who did not. Social gun culture is defined in this study as, “unseen codes of behaviour and powerful predictors of behavioural intentions and health behaviours. In many parts of the country, these social norms include participation in social activities around gun ownership.”⁵⁷

⁵² David Hemenway, “Risks and Benefits of a Gun in the Home,” *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* 5, no. 6 (February 2, 2011): 502-511. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1559827610396294>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Bindu Kalesan, Marcos D. Villarreal, Katherine M. Keyes, and Sandro Galea, “Gun ownership and social gun culture,” *British Medical Journal* (June 29, 2016): 1-5, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4809774/>.

⁵⁶ Bindu Kalesan, Marcos D. Villarreal, Katherine M. Keyes, and Sandro Galea, “Gun ownership and social gun culture,” *British Medical Journal* (June 29, 2016): 1-5, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4809774/>.

⁵⁷ Bindu Kalesan, Marcos D. Villarreal, Katherine M. Keyes, and Sandro Galea, “Gun ownership and social gun culture,” *British Medical Journal* (June 29, 2016): 1-5, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4809774/>.

The results of this study are important, when considering public health strategies that aim to change gun ownership. The researchers concluded that gun violence prevention policies might need to actively consider the prevailing social gun culture in the United States to reduce gun violence in this country.⁵⁸

Simonetti's 2015 study analyzed state firearm legislation and nonfatal firearm injuries; the first ever to conduct research of this kind. The purpose of this study was to determine whether stricter state-level firearm legislation was associated with lower hospital discharge rates for nonfatal firearm injuries.⁵⁹ Researchers found that states with the strictest legislation had a lower discharge rate in total.⁶⁰ Stricter state legislation, specific to strengthening background checks before firearm purchase, was associated with lower discharge rates for total and unintentional nonfatal firearm injuries.⁶¹ Also, stricter legislation was associated with lower discharge rates for self-inflicted and unintentional nonfatal firearm injuries.⁶²

Household firearm ownership rates have been shown to be associated with states' rates of firearm related suicides and homicides: thus, legislation might reduce firearm injuries by limiting overall firearm ownership.⁶³ A strong association has been demonstrated between safer firearm storage practices and a lower risk of suicide and unintentional firearm deaths.⁶⁴ Hence, legislation aimed at increasing safe firearm storage may decrease firearm-related injuries,

⁵⁸ Bindu Kalesan, Marcos D. Villarreal, Katherine M. Keyes, and Sandro Galea, "Gun ownership and social gun culture," *British Medical Journal* (June 29, 2016): 1-5, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4809774/>.

⁵⁹ Joseph Simonetti, Ali Rowhani-Rahbar, Brianna Mills, Bessie Young, and Frederick P. Rivara, "State Firearm Legislation and Nonfatal Firearm Injuries," *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 8 (January 24, 2015): 1703-1709. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302617>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

particularly in homes with children and adolescents.⁶⁵ In addition, laws that promote background checks before firearm purchase and those that limit private firearm transactions and transfers may help limit firearm access by those most likely to harm themselves or others.⁶⁶ Research shows that in states with more restrictive firearm legislation, there are lower rates of total firearm deaths, including homicides, suicides, and injuries among children.⁶⁷ Previous studies have also shown that laws related to background checks and limitations on handgun possession and transfer are associated with lower rates of firearm deaths, including suicides and homicides.⁶⁸ A cross sectional, time series analysis of pooled data from 1979-2000 found that most states that enacted child access laws experienced greater declines in those injuries than did states that had not.⁶⁹

Researcher Katherine Vittes' study analyzed the source of offenders' weapons in the 13 states with the weakest gun control laws. It focused on 253 inmates who had committed crimes involving firearms acquired in states with the most relaxed gun laws. Researchers determined 43% fired the gun during the incident in question and that 40% of offenders incarcerated for committing crimes with a gun in the 13 states were in possession of the gun illegally.⁷⁰ If these states had adopted more restrictive standards like those in place a number of other states, an additional 29% of the persons incarcerated for committing a crime with a firearm would have

⁶⁵ Joseph Simonetti, Ali Rowhani-Rahbar, Brianna Mills, Bessie Young, and Frederick P. Rivara, "State Firearm Legislation and Nonfatal Firearm Injuries," *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 8 (January 24, 2015): 1703-1709. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302617>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Katherine Vittes, Jon Vernick, and Daniel Webster, "Legal Status and Source of offenders' firearms in states with the least stringent criteria for gun ownership," *John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Gun Policy and Research* 19, no. 1 (February 4, 2013): 26-31, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228063188_Legal_status_and_source_of_offenders'_firearms_in_states_with_the_least_stringent_criteria_for_gun_ownership.

been legally prohibited from possessing a firearm at the time of their current offense.⁷¹ The results from this study show that there is a correlation between states with the weakest gun laws and who is able to possess firearms.⁷² The debate continues over whether stricter laws will keep more guns out of the hands of criminals or whether the existing laws need to be better enforced.⁷³

Under federal law, persons buying guns from licensed gun dealers must undergo a criminal history background check. But federal law and the laws of most states do not require firearm sellers who are not licensed gun dealers to verify that purchasers of firearms are legally qualified to possess a firearm such as through a background check.⁷⁴ This is an active loophole that has allowed for prohibited persons to get access to a gun. Regardless of how a firearm was obtained, friends and family members were the most common source (34%), followed by drug dealers or other black-market sources (30.4%).⁷⁵ Only 13.4% of prohibited persons got the gun directly from a gun store or pawn shop where federal law requires prospective firearm purchasers to pass a background check.⁷⁶ More than half (55.6%) of offenders for whom firearm purchase and possession was legal under standards bought or traded for the gun used in their most recent crime compared with 39.2% of offenders who were prohibited under current state law or federal law.⁷⁷

Well-known gun violence researcher and author, Dr. Garen J. Wintemute analyzed several

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

studies and concluded that if background checks and extreme-risk-protections orders, both existing policies, were adequately implemented, gun violence and mass shootings would be less likely to occur.⁷⁸ “Perhaps most important is that information that would prohibit high-risk people from purchasing firearms is frequently — many thousands of times per year — not reported. 22% of all firearm transfers nationwide proceed without a check being done. The Air Force alone has apparently failed to report tens of thousands of prohibited events, and its reporting has been the best among all branches of the military. Remarkably, other than for federal agencies, reporting of such events is not required. Since the Supreme Court decision in *Printz v. United States*, a federal mandate for state and local agencies to report prohibiting events to the federal government has been seen as unconstitutional. States, however, remain free to impose such mandates.”⁷⁹

There are several actions that could immediately be taken to reduce gun violence, including: improving background-check policies; requiring background checks for private-party transfers; requiring state and local agencies to report prohibiting events; fully implementing the existing federal background-check requirement; clarifying definitions of prohibiting events; strengthen enforcement efforts; considering a permit-to-purchase approach; prohibiting release of firearms until background checks are completed; and enacting gun-violence restraining order policies.⁸⁰ Many of the policies already passed in an effort to address gun violence lack proper implementation. In fact, two already existing policies, background checks and extreme risk protection orders, would limit the number of prohibited persons from being able to access a gun,

⁷⁸ Garen J. Wintemute, “How to Stop Mass Shootings,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 373, no. 13 (September 27, 2018): 1-4, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1807277>.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

if properly implemented, which is ultimately why the responsibility of reducing gun violence and illegal firearm ownership falls back onto Congress, Wintemute argues.⁸¹

The results of these studies are critical to understanding the honest effects of gun ownership and its implications for the average American. The literature shows that there are definite correlations between gun ownership and increased risk for homicide, suicide, and unintentional injury. There are loopholes that exist within the firearms market and there remain ongoing discrepancies between national and state law. The research that currently exists indicates that there are many factors at play that have made the firearm industry what it is today, which means that our country will need several solutions to completely resolve the issue. Almost every reliable study in the field of public health mentions the need for additional research and the need for action at the national, state, and local levels.

While there is a fairly adequate amount of research about the issue of gun violence in America, countless gaps still exist. In relation to mortality rates, gun violence research was the least researched cause of death and the 2nd least funded cause of death.⁸² It is necessary that this topic not only be analyzed through a public health lens, but also prioritized to receive necessary and adequate federal funding for research. Public health is meant to assure that all lives and life expectancy rates remain as high as possible, while finding ways to address needs within the greater community as a whole. Gun violence has remained a highly important issue to those within the public health field, yet it also is a topic that struggles to be analyzed as much as it should, based on the number of American lives this issue affects, in comparison to other causes

⁸¹ Garen J. Wintemute, "How to Stop Mass Shootings," *The New England Journal of Medicine* 373, no. 13 (September 27, 2018): 1-4, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1807277>.

⁸² <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2595514>

of severe injury and/or death. Until this is done, gun violence will continue to wreak havoc on our country.

On average, fewer people die from gun violence in states with strong gun laws and more people die in states with weak gun laws.⁸³ Alaska has the highest gun death rate among the states, and the weakest laws - nearly 25 people are killed with guns for every 100,000 residents.⁸⁴

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Alaska	X	X			X	X	X	✓	X	X
Alabama	X	X		X		X	X		X	X
Montana	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Louisiana	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Mississippi	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X	
Missouri	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Wyoming	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
West Virginia	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
New Mexico	X	X	X	X	X		X		✓	X
Tennessee	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓	X	X

Key:

1. Assault weapon and large capacity magazine ban
2. Bulk firearm purchase restrictions
3. Firearm owner licensing
4. Firearm registration
5. Gun dealer licensing
6. Handgun design safety standards
7. Local government has authority to regulate firearms and ammunition
8. Mental health record reporting to federal database
9. Universal background checks

⁸³ Giffords Law Center, Facts about Gun Violence, <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

10. Waiting period

*** X means there is no law in that state, ✓ means there is a law in that state, a blank space means there is inadequate research.

Table 2: Ten states with the lowest gun death rates compared to gun laws (Giffords Law Center)										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Iowa	X	X		X	X		X	✓	✓	✓
Nebraska	X	X			X	X	✓			
Minnesota	X	X	X	X		✓	X			
California	✓				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
New Jersey	✓				✓	X	✓			✓
Connecticut	✓	X			✓	X	✓		✓	
Rhode Island	X	X		X	✓	X	X		✓	✓
New York	✓				✓	✓	✓		✓	X
Massachusetts	✓	X	✓			✓	✓	✓		X
Hawaii	✓	X		✓	✓	✓	✓			

Comparatively, only 2 people are killed with guns for every 100,000 residents in Hawaii, which has the lowest gun death rates and strongest gun laws in the country, with less than one tenth Alaska’s rate.⁸⁵

In Table 2, listed as law #7 (local government has authority to regulate firearms and ammunition), seven of the ten states had a various form of this policy; the most of any of the laws seen in the charts above. This is critical in determining the most effective gun laws in all states, and these results also parallel the findings of this paper.

⁸⁵ Giffords Law Center, “Facts about Gun Violence,” <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics/>.

In analyzing both tables, it is clear that there is not one specific law that completely resolves the issue nor are any of the state policies perfect by any means. However research shows that only a few effective laws will make a significant difference in the number of lives lost. These findings were also well described in a statement by an interview participant, who stated, “so there’s a lot of different solutions and I think that’s what’s often hard is that especially policy makers want that one fix, like what’s the secret law we can pass, and there really isn’t one because there are so many different types of violence so were going to need to do a lot to make a difference but again when you look at the state level or look at states like Massachusetts, Hawaii, or California, there’s a reason why they have less, it’s not perfect, but there’s a reason why there’s less gun violence in those states.”⁸⁶

IV. Theoretical Framework

There are two arguments made in this paper. The first is that more public health research about gun violence and its effect on the nation is needed and the second argument is gun violence needs to be prioritized as a public health and legislative issue.

Why is it that gun violence should be paid attention to? There are two reasons: to reduce the number of lives lost to firearms, which is why it should be a legislative priority, and because public health research impacts gun violence, which is why more data is needed. The impacts of gun violence on the country demand that it be more heavily analyzed. An interview participant stated, “it’s a major cause of premature death and something that we should really be seeing as a public health crisis in the country. And, unfortunately, our government really hasn’t treated it that way.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Interview 2

⁸⁷ Interview 1

The need for additional research and making the issue of gun violence a legislative priority go hand-in-hand with each other. Without an adequate amount of credible and meaningful research, policymakers will struggle to make necessary decisions and fail to see the true effects gun violence has on our country. The research shows that changes should be made otherwise our country will continue to suffer due to gun violence.

Using seat belt laws as an example for how public health research can be useful for policymaking, this thesis argues injury prevention often requires legislative solutions. The idea is that over time, the technology of cars increased tremendously, and with that came higher mortality rates. As vehicles began to operate at a higher rate of speed and have increased abilities, technology was developed and decisions were made with the intention of keeping people safe. As a result, individuals had a small limitation placed upon them, the law requiring those within a car to wear a seat belt, and, in return, many lives have been spared.⁸⁸

The rationale of this paper uses this same logic; the idea of addressing gun violence is not about removing individual rights, rather placing reasonable limitations upon owners and possessors, based on the current capabilities and technology available, to ensure that safety is maintained.

V. Methodology & Data Collection

In an effort to answer the question this paper asks, qualitative research was conducted through four individual, semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviews were chosen as the specific methodology for this study because it was necessary to determine what participants thought about the topic.

⁸⁸ Adrienne LaFrance, “Why Haven’t Gunmakers Improved Safety Technology the Way Automakers Did?” *The Atlantic*, (January 21, 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/01/guns-cars/424878/>.

Interviewees consisted of policymakers, such as legislative staffers, as well as advocacy group members and individuals affected by gun violence. The recruitment process began with referrals from Dominican University of California, in addition to personal contacts. A convenience sample was used through the snowball technique to recruit additional interviewees. Both recruitment and interviews took place in person, over the phone, and by email.⁸⁹

Interviewees were asked a total of 11 questions (see Appendix A), to gain an understanding of their opinion about where the main problems within gun violence lie. Participants were asked questions such as: what effective solutions to reduce gun violence would be; how these solutions should be implemented at both the state and federal level; whether they believe there are adequate approaches to gun violence and gun violence prevention in the U.S.; which policies are most effective regarding gun violence in the United States and what specifically about these policies makes them effective; and how the lack of public health research has affected both policy and advocacy regarding gun violence prevention? Once the interviews were transcribed, both narrative and content analysis were used to determine common themes, strategies, and important statements amongst all participants that should be included in the findings.

Participants included a gun violence advocate from California, a legislative staffer for a Congressman in Washington D.C., the Director of Federal Affairs of Urban Lab Crime Laws in Chicago, and an employee from the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence in Washington D.C. All participants had an interest in both gun violence policy and advocacy.

⁸⁹ This study received approval from Dominican University of California (reference #10875).

Common themes found in the interviews were compared to the literature to find similarities. In both the findings of this study and research in the field, there was continuous discussion of the need for additional research, policies, and education.

VI. Findings

The common themes that derived from the interviews were:

1. The need for multi-faceted resolutions, national, state, and local level laws and action, including: permit to purchase, increasing the prohibited purchase and possession of guns, universal background checks, extreme risk laws, banning assault weapons and high capacity magazines, domestic violence firearm prohibition, identifying at-risk populations, and investing in community based violence prevention programs.

One of the interview participants described the need for legislative action at every level of government in their interview. They said, "I think that you need both. I think that national policies are very effective because we do have 50 states plus D.C. and Puerto Rico. And in D.C. we have really strong gun laws but we're next to Virginia, that doesn't have strong gun laws at all so most of the guns in our city are from Virginia, which is 5 minutes away. And so without that national policy, it's just a hodge podge patchwork of different laws. Someone can easily just pass the border. But then at the same time, I think that the state level policies are still important because they take into account what the community is facing and so again, I work in Federal Affairs, so I think that federal policies are so important but they really need to be implemented at the local level because every state is a little bit different. Delaware for instance, there's only 3 counties so they can do a lot at the state level. And California, I'm from Los Angeles county so I know that the county itself, is larger than the majority of states. So implementing things in

California really needs to be more at the county level because there's just too many people and too many law enforcement officers to train. It's just a little bit more of that implementation so I'd say that they're both very effective but I'd say that the implementation is very important to be done at the state and local level.”⁹⁰

When asked which policies have seemingly been most effective and why at state and national level, the second participant stated, “regarding gun violence particularly, there are huge issues when it comes to the big disparities between mental health and actually funding programs and resources that could actually be helpful when it comes to people that commit gun violence. Obviously it is a huge issue. We haven't passed any actual preventative gun legislation at all. Like literally at all. We haven't done anything in regards to background checks, like that whole package that was proposed in the House hasn't been passed yet, so that is obviously like a huge issue when it comes to prevention. California has way more stringent state level policies than national so I believe that California has more effective gun violence policies, but we still do have mass shootings in California because it's still easy to buy a gun off the street. So at that point, I don't know. I really think that a bullet and an ammunition registry will help but we don't know if these things will help if they are never enacted into law. We need to actually pass policy, and make policies more effective. I think there's two ways to do that. One is to always have an active policy, always some kind of active task force that is in charge of regulating it. And then two is to make sure that within the legislation there is a written portion where there is like every year a study done to see where and how it's effective. Because unless you start collecting that data the

⁹⁰ Interview 1.

legislation can be enacted and become U.S. code, but we won't ever see what the actual legislation ever does."⁹¹

Participant three also mentioned the need for policy at the national, state, and local level. "We have to have those laws, but we need to build on top of that with permit to purchase or like licensing laws. In California, I'm actually from there so I have a bias, but you have to register your firearm if you have a handgun. You have to go through this training to have it. And we know that that also prevents violence and all of its forms. And then when it comes to mass shootings, reducing the legality of guns is going to make a difference. So the assault weapons ban, we know that a high capacity magazine ban has been shown to reduce mass shootings and just deadly violence in general. So there's a lot of different solutions and I think that's what's often especially hard is that policymakers want that one fix, like what's the secret law we can pass, and there really isn't one because there are so many different types of violence. So we're going to need to do a lot to make a difference but again when you look at the state level or look at states like Massachusetts, Hawaii, or California, there's a reason why they have less, it's not perfect, but there's a reason why there's less gun violence in those states. I think a lot of time people want something that is very much about the gun and it's like we need to do both. Like we have to deal with the actual hardware of the gun but also let's look back and see ok why is someone committing violence in the first place? What is that root cause of violence? How do we build policy around that?"⁹²

Participant four touched upon the need for policy, stating, "so the big policy issue that needs to be addressed at all levels is reducing access to firearms for people that are at risk. For

⁹¹ Interview 2.

⁹² Interview 3.

the extreme risk laws for instance, we know that generally risk is temporary, so your risk fluctuates over time which is why a lot of the policies we [Coalition to Stop Gun Violence] support are time limited. So when you are at risk for suicide we know that just removing that gun for a little is going to save your life. Also in a domestic violence situation, not having the gun during that potential period of rage is going to save a life. And then also just reducing the legality of weapons when you are using a gun, a handgun is a lot less deadly than an assault weapon. But just having the risk based approach is something that I think is the most effective and necessary because you need to know who is at risk for violence and not just like you know ‘oh I think this person is at risk but like the actual evidence based risk factors prove so’ and making it harder for those people to access a gun during those periods of high risk. And so age laws, in some states you can get a gun very very young and your brain hasn’t even started developing at that time, so we know you’re at higher risk. And something that we are starting to look into now that we have an aging population with dementia. Like what does that mean? Those people are now at risk because their cognitive decline is happening. So there’s not really a policy there but I think just that risk based approach is probably what would make policies effective at all levels of government.”⁹³

2. The need to engage youth.

When asked about the most effective advocacy strategies, every participant mentioned involving the youth.

Participant one stated “ok, one thing I have to say actually that I did not share is that the youth always come out for this issue and they always come out for more background checks and

⁹³ Interview 4.

just further processes for owning a gun. But the youth never come out to vote. What is it, the 18-25 years old or 18-35 or something, only like 13% of people voted. If the youth want to change legislation, if you want to change discussion, if you want to change votes, if you want to change like the actual way of lives are controlled then, when you are 18, register to vote and if that one person, if that is really your big issue, gun violence, then that one person is like your Member of Congress or your Senator and they are completely against background checks then register to vote and vote them out. That is where a lot of the youth really truly fail at being the strongest advocates they possibly could be. So registering to vote when you are 18 is a very, very key portion of this issue and then not only registering but casting your vote.”⁹⁴

Participant two said, “I would say grassroots advocacy has, I mean really, made a difference in gun violence prevention in the last few years. And especially with youth getting so involved. I think that it's harder for policymakers to turn away when kids are being involved in policy and are saying, you know, ‘our lives are on the line here.’ So making it personal oftentimes I think is a very effective strategy and making it that the public wants this. You know that’s kind of how lawmakers should be doing everything they do, based on what their constituents in their communities want to see happen. So when you have kids involved, and you have moms involved, and grandparents involved, and parents, and the entire community is coming together to want to try to solve gun violence that’s gonna be the most effective than just having, which it was for so long, just having one person that cares or one organization or a small group of people.”⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Interview 1.

⁹⁵ Interview 2.

Participant three mentioned, “yeah, I think especially with the youth, it's kind of an unsuspecting people that are involved, you know, you think kids are going to school. I know I was always interested in policy but when I was growing up I don't even think I knew what Congress was or anything like that. And so now living in D.C. and working in gun violence prevention and March For Our Lives coming in and talking to legislators, it's like you have to look, because this is not normal. Like what? Why are these kids here? Whereas an adult comes in, you're like, 'ok yeah there's adults everywhere,' but I think that unusual messenger is what really makes March For Our Lives and just youth in general, really as that messenger, such an effective strategy because it's unusual so maybe we're taking a closer look. I think that's also, not with gun violence prevention, but we're seeing that even with climate change across the country. Like Al Gore has been talking about climate change for 30 years since he ran as President in 2001 or in 2000. And it wasn't really until this or last year when Greta, you know everyone knows who she is now and she started a one person march. And I think with that unusual messenger where it's like, 'oh there's this kid that is protesting, why is she doing this?' And it sparks a huge movement and I think it takes that unusual messenger to make people take a second look. And who wants to ignore kids also? Well some people do but I imagine it gets harder to.”⁹⁶

Participant four said, “I think definitely having the youth voices has really changed the political climate around gun violence prevention and I really think it was the March For Our Lives organization that made a huge difference with guns because it was unfortunately when Sandy Hook happened, it was the parents that were doing that lobbying. And to me, like I was

⁹⁶ Interview 3.

compelled but like clearly it didn't necessarily work that well. But when you're hearing it from the kids, who saw it, you know like those high school students who were there and who witnessed and lost their friends, it was them organizing it, and being in charge, and being the voice that I think really made a difference. I think doing the march a very effective strategy. It kind of showed like we're not going away. I think also living in this time of resistance for a lot of different policies, especially with Donald Trump as President, has changed things. Also I think that Democrats have become more socially liberal so even if you are a bit more conservative on other things, if you're a Democrat I feel like every single one supports gun violence prevention, where I know that 10 years ago, that was not the case. So I think that's just a sign of the Democratic Party in general. But I think also, even though mass shootings are the smallest percentage of gun violence, they make the most news and so I think it also created this fear in a lot of people that this could happen to anyone, this has always been true, even without mass shootings. But I think that that visual has also made it a little bit harder for them to turn away."⁹⁷

3. The need for additional research.

Participants were asked whether they believed there was adequate public health research that currently exists regarding gun violence, and if so, how the lack affected both the policy and advocacy of this issue.

Participant one said, "I don't know if there's enough research at this time. I know that they always want to try to give the CDC more research, like to see how gun violence is directly affected to mental health, like there's a disease or something. But honestly we hear time and time again that there's not enough money for research. So I don't think that there's adequate research

⁹⁷ Interview 4.

being done because I don't think we're funding it properly. I think that for me, my big interest I'm super passionate about is suicide prevention. Um that's probably, it is the reason I work in gun violence prevention. I think it is the most overlooked form of gun violence and I think that there's a lot we can do and we know what the solutions are, we're just not doing it. Another thing I'm really interested is, is trying to break the stigma and myth that gun violence is caused by mental illness. We know through research that that's not true and yet both Democrats and Republicans alike believe that we should just ban anyone with a mental illness from owning a gun, and that's not going to do anything. So I think it's those, and also like I mentioned before, bringing that public health and research and data perspective to the policymaking process is something that I'm really interested in and passionate about. Mental illness isn't the cause of gun violence, even though I think that probably the majority of Americans believe that it is. And we do have clear research on that; that it's not only not the cause of gun violence, it's not the cause of violence. So it's very harmful and stigmatizing when legislators try to pass policies that are about mental illness. We need to focus on the actual risk factors and not just a diagnosis that we think. We try to stigmatize people with mental illness as the "other" and as a scapegoat, rather than attacking the real problem. This could be rightfully addressed with research."⁹⁸

Participant two said, "yeah, so our organization really looks at gun violence through that public health perspective and the goal is to try to prevent these tragedies before they happen. And looking at, using data and research. Luckily for research purposes when there's 50 states, you really can do all these interesting studies comparing what laws are working and not because every state is different. And so we know that there are laws that are evidence based and that have

⁹⁸ Interview 1.

proven to prevent different types of gun violence. So for suicides for instance, we know that extreme risk protection orders, in California it's weirdly called the gun violence restraining order or GVRO, and then nationally some people call it a red flag law but those extreme risk laws, they've been shown to prevent firearm suicides. And a study actually found that in Connecticut for every 10 to 20 orders issued, one suicide was prevented. So it's a very effective policy. We also know that mandatory waiting periods, which is the law in California but is not in most states, so having just a 7 to 10 day waiting period when having someone buy your firearms and then take it home, has been shown to prevent suicides. We also know that just basic safer storage of guns, so just storing it in a lockbox and storing ammunition separately than the firearm in periods, we know that that can prevent suicides. Then looking at homicides, it kind of, which is hard, the different types of homicides require different types of solutions. So when it comes to domestic violence, we know that by a domestic abuser having a gun, it increases the risk that there will be a deadly domestic violence incident. So there are laws called domestic violence restraining orders and they have, it's not just guns, but they have a lot of different things of content, depending again on the state. But what we advocate for is firearm removal. So not only are you prohibited, but law enforcement is removing these guns and they have found that it is effective not just in domestic violence but also homicides. When it comes to like community based violence, in cities, it is a little tricky. We know interestingly that sometimes not necessarily gun laws work so they found that increasing jobs for youth has reduced homicides, reduced violence. Just keeping like more green areas, which is like so simple but like having not deserted land can decrease violence. And then things like mentorships and cognitive behavioral therapy for people that are in those cycles of violence can reduce overall violence in communities. And

then at the basic or more like foundation of all gun laws is universal background checks. And on their own, they don't do as much, but they're like needed. They're like necessary but not sufficient. We have to have them, those laws, but we need to build on top of that with permit to purchase or like licensing laws. But we found all of this out through research, which is why we need to continue doing research. It is going to continue to give us those answers.”⁹⁹

Participant three said, “To me that seems like the biggest and oh, I guess a little bit more which is not happening now because we have a Republican in office but I know that there's like data to show that when Obama was elected the NRA would basically say, “Obama's gonna take all your guns” and so then people got nervous and went and bought all these guns and had this giant fear. So it was like this fear mongering tactic, but now that there's a Republican in office, people aren't really concerned I guess about that. So I would say that both the fear tactic and the money probably are some of the ways that could be refuted by adequate research. I think that because of the lack, there's a lot of questions still to be answered, and again, when there's less funding that means there are less studies being done. And there are a lot of unanswered questions and policymakers want to have a definite answer and there isn't. But we still need to do something. So it's like, ‘well ok if there's some research, lets try this.’ There's no harm in trying. But researchers really want that, “this definitely makes a difference or not.” The problem is that research and academia has really tried to separate, not just in gun violence, but in everything. There's like a weird thing in academia where they tell their professors that they can't lobby or do advocacy, which is to me, the biggest problem in our country when it comes to evidence based policy. And that's kind of why, the way our organization operates is we try to be that research

⁹⁹ Interview 2.

intermediary. So I talk to the academic researchers that don't want to do advocacy or aren't allowed to. I find out what they want to do and then I try to make that happen. Yeah but it's not, it's interesting, I wish that that was happening across every policy area, but it isn't, so I think when researchers and the experts are not using their voice, then that's affecting policy because that means that not good policy is happening and being passed. And then I think that the lack of research has made it that maybe we're trying to stop the wrong thing. So like in my opinion, I don't think we've done enough policy or even trying to get policies passed that reduce firearm suicides, even though that's the majority of gun deaths. I think that there's maybe because that's because of the lack of research, or it's between researchers and academia and the policymaking process but you know I think that because there isn't this strong research, we're not necessarily trying to pass these strong laws."¹⁰⁰

Participant four said, "yeah so I think that there is a lot of misunderstanding around, or at least when I talked to actual policymakers about this, is that there is research being done on gun violence, and it is public health researchers, and it is very strong research. The problem is that there aren't enough of them doing it, and that's because the federal government stopped funding that research in 1996. But the research doesn't necessarily go away. It just meant that there was less of it and it wasn't government funded. So there are a lot less researchers that do gun violence prevention research than there are with other leading causes of death. And before 1996, there was, I think there definitely was. Whereas now I think it's an exciting field and I think that's why we're getting more people into it in the last year or so. But before 1996, there was a lot of funding going into this and right now it kind of has shifted but this year the CDC just

¹⁰⁰ Interview 3.

appropriated \$25 million to study gun violence, which is still very little, but it's still better than nothing. So there definitely needs to be more research done, but there is a lot being done, but there is still a need for doing more.”¹⁰¹

In analyzing participant responses as well as the current literature, it is clear to see that the common themes paralleled what researchers have found about gun violence and its prevention, regarding the need and role of policy and advocacy.

VII. Analysis

While there is no one specific resolution that will eliminate gun violence in America there is a need for a variety of efforts and change. While the argument that a policy may not function properly does exist, that should not prevent it from being enacted; especially when the vast majority of Americans support the following policies: 87.8% are in favor of comprehensive background checks and 78.9% support gun-violence restraining orders, according to a 2016 Gallup poll.¹⁰² Current research suggests that “Congress, *at a bare minimum*, can bring the language of relevant statutes into the 21st century, enforce existing reporting requirements for federal agencies, and continue to support state efforts to mobilize and submit their records.”¹⁰³

Through conducting interviews and analyzing current literature to answer the question of “what policy strategies are effective in preventing the prohibited purchase and possession of firearms?” A total of five effective strategies were found. These strategies include: giving states and local governments the authority to regulate; incrementalism/foot-in-the-door-technique;

¹⁰¹ Interview 4.

¹⁰² Gary Langer, “6 in 10 fear a mass shooting; most think gun laws can help: POLL,” *ABC News* (September 9, 2019), <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/10-fear-mass-shooting-gun-laws-poll/story?id=65414785>.

¹⁰³ Garen J. Wintemute, “How to Stop Mass Shootings,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 373, no. 13 (September 27, 2018): 1-4, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1807277>.

getting youth involved; establishing a standard definition for reporting systems; and additional research.

The first, giving states and local governments the authority to regulate both gun laws and violence, was mentioned by every interview participant as a mandatory action. This has already been shown to be effective, where seven of the ten states with the lowest mortality rates due to firearms, had previously passed some kind of legislation on the matter (See Table 2). Because the U.S. is a federal system, the majority of the responsibility falls on state and local authorities to determine what is the best course of action for their residents and constituents. There are national laws that have yet to be implemented. Perhaps the federal government needs to enforce these laws and mandate that the states implement them. The federal government does this for other policies (ex. drinking age/tied to federal highway money). Federalism exists and the national government has already passed laws that have yet to be upheld in all 50 states. The majority of the responsibility should fall onto states and local authority to determine what is the best course of action for their people.

In our system policy is made incrementally. This is especially important when confronting a polarizing and divisive topic such as gun control and firearms rights. By using the “foot-in-the-door-technique,” or working to pass small pieces of legislation over time, it is much more likely that laws will be passed. Oftentimes, policymakers and advocates push to pass comprehensive laws that include many changes, as indicated by those who were interviewed and the literature reviewed. With gun violence legislation, it is necessary to start small and amass great change over time, versus overwhelming the system and its people all at once, with something that will likely never pass.

Getting young people to be involved in politics is hard, however with this topic and the fact that youth are many times affected by gun violence, younger generations have been seemingly more keen on wanting to use their voices to enact change. A legislative staffer for a Congressman in D.C. believed that unlike with many other policy issues, the youth has made a solid effort to get involved in gun policy and, as a result, policymakers tend to pay more attention to the issue.¹⁰⁴

Arguably the most critical step to take, due to its ability to address ongoing loopholes, is to establish a standard definition for reporting systems would ensure that every state and the federal government define a prohibited purchaser and possessor the same. This would ultimately reduce the number of individuals who access firearms illegally by making the reporting system more accurate, definite, and enforceable. The discrepancies among states allows for illegal access to firearms and additional gun violence.

The last effective policy strategy is additional research. As discussed throughout the entirety of this paper, there is a need for more funding and research regarding gun violence, to provide the necessary data for policymakers to make legislative change.

After having determined these effective solutions, the following question begs to be answered: how do we work towards what is needed within the confines of our system?

VIII. Conclusion & Recommendations

There are multiple advantages and disadvantages that result from federalism. It is beneficial in the case of ensuring that the national government does not encroach upon state's rights, however in the case of gun policy, it has had a tremendous influence and limiting effect.

¹⁰⁴ Interview 2

Because states establish their own rights, in the case of gun policy, some states have made very little effort to develop and uphold beneficial gun laws. While some states do make this effort, the discrepancy among states only allows for additional loopholes and a lack of accountability.

Taking federalism and all limitations into consideration, there are three recommendations that can be made moving forward, to reduce gun violence.

There is a need for collaboration among: policymakers, advocacy groups, and public health researchers alike. And, national, state, and local governments need to do their part and decide that it is time to take action, pass laws, and determine the proper actions for the United States.

After completing this pilot study there is a clear need for additional research. Future studies should interview more people and analyze data further. There is a tremendous amount of information that needs to be analyzed to truly understand the effects gun violence has on America. While there is an inadequate amount of research on the issue, we do know some of the problems gun violence causes, such as the economic costs and societal burdens that arise from hospital visits and treatments that fall on taxpayers. Of the research that does exist, there are strong results that show the risk, loopholes, and ongoing problems that firearm access creates. We need to continue to analyze the effects that gun violence has on our country and our people. We need to do this to benefit society as a whole.

Research shows that gun cultures may need to be considered for public health strategies that aim to change gun ownership in the United States.¹⁰⁵ Gun violence prevention policies might need to actively consider the prevailing social gun culture in the United States. Research shows

¹⁰⁵ Bindu Kalesan, Marcos D. Villarreal, Katherine M. Keyes, and Sandro Galea, "Gun ownership and social gun culture," *British Medical Journal* (June 29, 2016): 1-5, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4809774/>.

that there is a culture that surrounds gun ownership in the United States. Those who are surrounded by guns and gun owners are more likely to own one themselves.¹⁰⁶ “The link between social gun culture and gun ownership also suggest one avenue through which modern conceptions of the primacy of gun ownership, despite the potential public health consequences, are reinforced.”¹⁰⁷ It is in such findings that we see that researching gun violence is necessary. Research provides information about the most effective ways to address gun violence. This information is necessary for policymaking. There is a need to take different approaches than what has previously been done by working together. Simply put, there will not be only one solution to end gun violence in America. There are many different opinions of what this entails.

Stricter gun ownership laws in states with the lowest standards would make firearm possession illegal for many who used a gun to commit a crime. There is uncertainty about the degree to which stricter legal standards for firearm possession might deter criminal gun possession and use. But, adding barriers for the acquisition of guns by high-risks persons is an underused potential intervention.¹⁰⁸

It is important to recognize that although some people are at higher risk for unintentional shootings than others, accidents can happen to anyone; no one is completely immune, which makes it all the more necessary that effective policy strategies are used to ensure that adequate gun legislation is passed.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Bindu Kalesan, Marcos D. Villarreal, Katherine M. Keyes, and Sandro Galea, “Gun ownership and social gun culture,” *British Medical Journal* (June 29, 2016): 1-5, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4809774/>.

¹⁰⁸ Katherine Vittes, Jon Vernick, and Daniel Webster, “Legal Status and Source of offenders’ firearms in states with the least stringent criteria for gun ownership,” *John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Gun Policy and Research* 19, no. 1 (February 4, 2013): 26-31, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228063188_Legal_status_and_source_of_offenders'_firearms_in_states_w_ith_the_least_stringent_criteria_for_gun_ownership.

¹⁰⁹ David Hemenway, “Risks and Benefits of a Gun in the Home,” *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* 5, no. 6 (February 2, 2011): 502-511. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1559827610396294>.

There is a need to take different approaches than what has previously been done by working together. Simply put, there will not be only one solution to end gun violence in America. There are many different opinions of what this entails.

It is critical that the citizens of this country feel they can entrust their safety and protection to the government. Policymakers need to find common ground to work together. Through compromise and a common goal, the United States can fulfil its duty to serve and protect the American public.

Gun control, mass shootings, and gun violence are all very scary and unfortunate topics to have to discuss, however continuing to adopt the mindset that change is not necessary will only get the United States farther down a path of destruction and terror. The problem of gun violence will not go away on its own; it must be addressed by the wisest and most willing of our nation, to come together in compromise and good intent, to restore our rights to the true nature of the 2nd Amendment and ensure all Americans are safe and cared for.

APPENDIX A
SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions for Participants

1. Do you believe there are currently any issues regarding gun violence and gun violence prevention in the United States? If so, what are these issues?
 - a. Do you believe there are adequate approaches to these problems? If so, could you describe what that may be?
2. Which policies do you believe are most effective regarding gun violence and gun violence prevention in the United States?
3. What specifically about these policies makes them effective?
4. Do you believe that state level policies or national policies are most effective regarding gun violence and gun violence prevention in the United States? Why?
5. Which advocacy strategies do you believe are most effective regarding gun violence and gun violence prevention in the United States?
6. What about these advocacy strategies makes them effective?
7. Why do you think the NRA has been so effective in lobbying legislators at both the state and national level to not pass gun violence prevention policies? What about their advocacy strategies is most effective?
8. What about the current political climate: Do you see any significant changes in the past 5 years that have caused legislators to rethink gun violence prevention policies?
9. Do you think there is adequate research (public health) in the field? If no, was there a time when there was?
 - a. How do you think the lack of public health research has affected both policy and advocacy regarding gun violence prevention?
10. What are your personal interests in gun violence prevention?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share or that I neglected to ask?

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