



NATIONAL SAFETY COUNCIL

Position/Policy Statement

Safe Firearms

Policy/Position

The National Safety Council (NSC) calls specific attention to the lack of meaningful research relating to non-fatal and fatal firearms incidents. The Council supports efforts to bolster research and data collection related to firearm injury and death statistics. The Council strongly recommends that government, at all levels, together with interested groups and individuals develop a uniform procedure for identifying, reporting and summarizing firearms incidents. The absence of a reliable system for collecting and analyzing such data makes meaningful evaluation of the effectiveness of injury prevention programs extremely difficult. Likewise, NSC opposes efforts to restrict firearms research by state and federal agencies.

NSC supports legislation that enables and requires an effective background check on purchasers of firearms. This includes defining records which may prohibit a firearm purchase (i.e. criminal history, mental health, drug abuse, domestic violence, etc.) and ensuring that state and federal databases are aligned such that background checks can fully include such records. These requirements should apply to all firearm sales, and NSC supports state and federal legislative efforts towards and resources for implementing universal background checks that would remove loophole exemptions for firearm sales through private sellers or exhibition shows.

Finally, the Council believes that every person owning a firearm of any sort must be responsible for the safekeeping and proper use of the firearm. The Council supports governmental and community efforts to direct resources towards firearm safety education, and also joins the medical community in supporting incorporation of firearm safety questions into standard patient interactions.

Justification:

In 2015, 36,252 people died due to firearms,¹ and it is estimated that as many as 85,000 suffered non-fatal gun injuries.² Roughly one third of these deaths--12,979--are attributed to firearm homicides;³ the other two thirds-- 22,018 deaths--is due to firearm suicide.⁴ About 1% of the firearm deaths in 2015—or 489—were unintentional.⁵

¹ Injury Facts 2017

² CDC. WISQARSTM. Available at: http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/dataRestriction_inj.html

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/homicide.htm>

The prevalence of firearms contributes to injury and death that affects all age groups in all locations. At least one in three American homes contains a firearm.^{6,7} Firearm discharge is among the top 10 causes of unintentional death for people aged 1-24. In total over 16,000 children ages 0-19 are injured or will die by firearms each year.⁸

Americans also experience firearm-related violence in the workplace. According to the latest data collected in 2015 by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, firearms are involved in nearly 10% of all workplace fatalities.⁹

As a national non-profit committed to ending preventable death in our lifetime, NSC works tirelessly to ensure the safety of Americans in homes, workplaces, and on roadways. NSC is devoted to reducing the number of Americans injured and killed by firearms and believes that appropriate firearm policies will result in improved safety in our homes and workplaces.

Other leading public health organizations have recently called for changes in firearms policies in America. The rise of gun violence prompted the American Medical Association (AMA) to adopt a policy in June 2016 calling gun violence a public health “crisis unrivaled in any other developed country.”¹⁰ Also, in 2015, the American Public Health Association (APHA) penned a letter to the U.S. Senate co-signed by over 60 medical associations and academic institutes calling gun violence a “serious public health epidemic.”¹¹

Research and Data Collection

There are a number of strategies that may decrease the prevalence of firearm death and injury, but a primary goal must be the expansion of research and data into this field. NSC has already passed a policy position supporting improved research and data in general (policy position #71).

In 1997, Congress passed the 1997 Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act which stipulates that “none of the funds made available at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention may be used to advocate or promote gun control”.¹² Given this provision, \$2.6 million that had been earmarked for firearm research in FY1996 was transferred to support health education centers.¹³ In the two decades since that time there has been limited federal funding for firearms research.¹⁴ In its FY2016 request, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) earmarked just \$10 million of its \$11.5 billion budget (.08%) for gun violence prevention research.¹⁵ This compares to millions of dollars generally spent to research and prevent many common diseases that may kill far fewer people.

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/suicide.htm>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ http://www.norc.org/PDFs/GSS%20Reports/GSS_Trends%20in%20Gun%20Ownership_US_1972-2014.pdf

⁷ http://www.people-press.org/2016/08/26/opinions-on-gun-policy-and-the-2016-campaign/augustguns_methodology/

⁸ www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars/

⁹ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/cfoi.t02.htm>

¹⁰ <https://www.ama-assn.org/ama-calls-gun-violence-%E2%80%9Cpublic-health-crisis%E2%80%9D>

¹¹ https://www.apha.org/~media/files/pdf/advocacy/letters/2015/151212_cdc_gun_research.ashx

¹² Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act, 1997. Pub. L. 104-208. Pg. 245. 30 September 1996. Web. <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-104publ208/pdf/PLAW-104publ208.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/1996/7/11/house-section/article/h7280-2>

¹⁴ <http://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2013/02/gun-violence.aspx>

¹⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/budget/documents/fy2016/fy-2016-cdc-congressional-justification.pdf>

APHA asserts that the medical research community has been “hampered by the lack of evidence-based research to point our communities toward effective gun violence prevention programs.”¹⁶ As it currently stands, the medical research community lacks clear answers to questions regarding gun use, ownership, and education much less accurate incident reporting. For example, researchers have a difficult time assessing the number of guns in circulation (even in small areas), and thus do not have accurate information about the volume and frequency of firearms bought and sold.

NSC strongly believes that better data can result in better solutions to gun violence. The Council urges government at all levels to develop uniform, transparent firearm incident reporting data, as well as restoring research funding that is necessary to shed more light on firearm deaths and injuries.

Background checks

Governance over background checks on firearms purchases is split between the federal and state governments. 18 U.S. Code § 921 and 922 states that federally licensed firearm dealers must check firearm purchaser eligibility through the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). The system compiles prohibiting offenses for firearm purchase, and if a prospective buyer is flagged, the FBI has up to three days to inquire further. After three days, the process proceeds regardless of FBI status.

States have broad latitude to augment the federal background check law. They may insert their own background check system in place of the NICS, and in some cases state permit law can supersede the need for a background check at point of purchase (the so-called Brady Exemption¹⁷). The most complete checks are done in those states that voluntarily coalesce their law enforcement and mental health records with the national system. Some groups believe that the NICS should be updated to mandatorily capture these state records, so that background checks fully ensure a purchaser history free of violent crime, mental health issues, drug addiction, domestic violence, and more. Firearm groups such as the National Shooting Sports Foundation, an NSC member, have been active proponents of such updates,¹⁸ recognizing that effectiveness of background checks are dependent on the quality of the data included in the check.

Despite the lack of coordinated federal research on gun violence, evidence supports more complete background checks at the point of purchase. Studies typically look at changes in rates of homicides before and after background checks (or similar regulations) were implemented in specific states. For example, after repealing a permit requirement in 2007, Missouri saw firearm homicides increase by 23%¹⁹ and firearm suicides increase by 16%.²⁰ A 2005 study published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice* examined firearm homicide data across 16 states while controlling for economic and social factors and found that background checks produced “a clear and consistent negative association with firearm homicides.”²¹ There is also evidence to show that background checks reduce firearm suicide rates. In a five-year study of CDC suicide data

¹⁶ https://www.apha.org/~media/files/pdf/advocacy/letters/2015/151212_cdc_gun_research.ashx

¹⁷ <https://www.atf.gov/rules-and-regulations/permanent-brady-permit-chart>

¹⁸ <http://www.nssf.org/newsroom/releases/2012/050112.cfm>

¹⁹ http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-gun-policy-and-research/_pdfs/effects-of-missouris-repeal-of-its-handgun-purchaser-licensing-law-on-homicides.pdf

²⁰ <https://practicalbioethics.org/files/gun-violence/suicide-effects-of-changes-in-permit-to-purchase-handgun-laws.pdf>

²¹ Ruddel, Rick, G Larry Mays, State background checks and firearms homicides, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, v. 33 2005

(2008-2012), the 14 states and DC that required a background check experienced 48% fewer gun suicides per capita than the 36 states that did not, despite no significant difference in non-firearm suicide rates.²²

Current federal code only applies to licensed dealers, meaning that the many firearms that are bought and sold through private transaction are not subject to the reporting requirements described above. Between 14-22% of all guns are purchased on the secondary market.²³ For that reason, the National Safety Council supports efforts to ensure that full background checks (incorporating the most complete range of law enforcement and mental health records) are extended to all purchase points.

Education on Safekeeping and Proper use

Responsible safekeeping and proper usage is an essential duty of all firearm owners. NSC has previously stated that increasing education geared towards secure firearm storage would likely have a significant effect on unintentional injury and death.²⁴ A 2005 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* examined incidents from 1994 to 2001 in which a child or adolescent (under the age of 20) gained access to a firearm and injured himself/herself or another. After examining 106 incidents, the authors concluded that four firearm safekeeping practices – keeping a gun locked, keeping a gun unloaded, storing ammunition separately, and locking ammunition – represent a feasible protective strategy to reduce the number of children and teenagers injured in houses with firearms.²⁵ According to a 2006 survey from the Harvard School of Public Health, 22% of gun-owners with children under 18 stored their gun loaded, and 31.5% stored a gun unlocked.²⁶ These practices create unsafe environments for other young occupants and visitors to the home.

The risk of unsafe storage practices extends to adults as well. A 2002 psychiatric study noted that elderly Americans commit firearm suicide at a greater rate than the national average (71% to 57%), and keeping a gun unsecured and loaded was a dominant risk factor in this phenomenon.²⁷ A 2004 analysis by the National Center for Health Statistics found that firearm owners who kept their firearm locked or unloaded were 60% less likely to commit suicide.²⁸ The Harvard Injury Control Research Center asserts that “gun (operational) training is not associated with appropriate gun storage”.²⁹ There must be a greater effort by the safety community to ensure that those who do bring firearms into their homes do so in a safe and responsible manner.

NSC supports efforts at all levels of government to implement firearm safety programs that educate the public on safe storage and use. States and local communities can and should dedicate resources toward educating residents on safe firearm ownership. NSC supports firearm organization efforts to expand the scope and availability of safety resources provided to firearm enthusiasts. Furthermore, NSC supports the policy of the American Academy of

²² www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars/

²³ <http://annals.org/aim/article/2595892/firearm-acquisition-without-background-checks-results-national-survey>

²⁴ Reference NSC Policy Position #70

²⁵ <http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/200330>

²⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16894076>

²⁷ Conwell, Yeates, Kenneth Connor, Christopher Cox, Access to Firearms and Risk for Suicide in Middle-Aged and Older Adults, *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 10:4, 2002

²⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1763337/pdf/v058p00841.pdf>

²⁹ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/hicrc/firearms-research/public-opinion/>

Pediatrics (AAP) and AMA in encouraging physicians to incorporate questions regarding the presence and availability of firearms in the household into patient interactions.^{30,31}

Parents can use resources like those provided by the AAP *Connected Kids* violence prevention program to make homes safer.³² This provides parents with factual guides to inform their decision-making on preventing child access to dangerous household products, including firearms.

A 2016 study from the University of Washington looked at the education and outreach mechanisms themselves, finding that providing physical storage devices had a much larger effect on promoting safe firearm storage than simple counseling.³³

Groups with financial or advocacy interest in wider distribution/use of firearms will likely oppose any policy efforts that make it more difficult to freely purchase firearms. However, with our focus on limiting workplace violence and eliminating preventable death, NSC believes it is appropriate to support these reasonable measures.

This position statement reflects the opinions of the National Safety Council but not necessarily those of each member organization.

Adopted by the National Safety Council, 2017
Supersedes Firearms, Policy 71.

³⁰ <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/130/5/e1416.full>

³¹ AMA Policy: Firearm Safety Counseling in Physician-Led Health Care Teams H-145.976

³² <https://patiented.solutions.aap.org/handout.aspx?gbosid=166246>

³³ <https://epirev.oxfordjournals.org/content/38/1/111.abstract>