



# Closing Gaps in Washington's Gun Laws Will Prevent Tragedies

By Chelsea Parsons and Rukmani Bhatia | October 26, 2018

Everyday gun violence is a problem facing communities across the United States—and Washington state is no exception. Each year, children die in unintentional shootings at home; youth take their own lives or others' with firearms; and hundreds of guns are stolen, leading to more crime. Guns that are not securely stored in the home by gun owners increase the possibility of these tragedies occurring.

Washington state is a leader on gun violence prevention policies. In addition to passing strong laws through the state legislature that seek to reduce firearm deaths and injuries in the state, in recent years, grassroots advocates have successfully used the ballot to push for common-sense gun reform. In 2014, Washington voters overwhelmingly approved a ballot initiative expanding background checks for all gun sales.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, voters took action a second time, approving a ballot measure establishing an extreme risk protection order, which allows family members and law enforcement personnel to temporarily remove guns from someone a judge deems to be a significant threat to themselves or others.<sup>2</sup>

These efforts have been vital in helping make Washington's communities more secure. The state received a "B" grade and ranked 10th strongest overall in the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence's most recent annual review of state-level gun laws in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Yet while Washington is an exemplary model of both elected officials and local advocates working to address gun violence in their communities, gaps remain in the state's laws. One area in need of urgent attention by policymakers in the state concerns the risks of unsecured guns in the home and the need to ensure that gun owners are storing guns safely. While much of the national conversation around gun violence focuses on public displays of that violence—such as mass shootings in public locations—the reality is that a substantial portion of gun violence in the United States has roots in the home. When guns in the home are not safely stored to help prevent unauthorized access, they can quickly become an instrument of tragedy.

Safe storage legislation mandating that firearms be locked when not in use, coupled with dangerous access prevention laws that hold gun owners accountable if their unsecured firearm is accessed by an unauthorized user such as a child, help prevent

these tragedies. Lawmakers in Seattle have already recognized the need for this legislation, passing safe storage regulations in the city earlier this summer.<sup>4</sup> Implementing these laws throughout the state has the potential to increase safety in communities across Washington state and, as a result, save lives.

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## Fatal consequences of unsecured guns in Washington homes

As private gun ownership has proliferated in the United States, so has the number of children who live in homes with firearms. Unfortunately, many of those guns are not stored in a secure manner. A team of researchers from Harvard University, Columbia University, and Northeastern University found that roughly 4.6 million children ages 17 and younger live in a home with at least one unlocked and loaded gun.<sup>5</sup> Such lax storage methods increase the opportunity for children to find, play with, or use these dangerous weapons without their parent's or guardian's knowledge, often with tragic results.

### Unintentional shootings at home

Nationally, roughly 89 percent of fatal unintentional shootings involving children occur at home.<sup>6</sup> From 2002 through 2016, 1,723 children under age 18 in the United States died from an unintentional firearm injury; 18 of those children died in Washington.<sup>7</sup> On July 21, 2013, for example, 4-year old Dwayne Kerrigan fatally shot himself in the head while playing with a handgun at home in Sedro-Woolley, Washington.<sup>8</sup> In August 2018, a 14-year-old boy was killed at home in Burien, Washington, after being shot in the head while playing with a handgun with a 16-year-old friend.<sup>9</sup> Using a secure storage mechanism, such as a gun lock or gun safe, could prevent tragedies like these from occurring.

### Youth suicide

Young people with unsecured guns at home also face the risk of suicide by gun. In Washington, people use guns to take their own lives more than any other method.<sup>10</sup> According to the Washington State Department of Health, suicide is the second-leading cause of death among young people ages 10 to 24 in the state, with almost twice as many young people in that age range dying from suicide than from homicide.<sup>11</sup> According to a 2010 survey conducted by the Washington State Department of Health, State Department of Social and Health Services, and other state institutions, 18 percent of 10th-graders reported having seriously considered death by suicide within a year prior to the survey; 7 percent of those students had attempted to take their own lives at some point in the year before the survey.<sup>12</sup> In addition, 14 percent of sixth-graders surveyed reported having seriously considered suicide at some point in their lives, with 5 percent having attempted to take their own lives.<sup>13</sup>

Nationally, 9,369 young people ages 18 and younger took their own lives with a firearm from 2002 through 2016; 257 of those children were in Washington.<sup>14</sup> In more than 75 percent of suicide attempts in the United States by youth ages 19 and

younger involving a firearm, the weapon came from their own home or from the residence of their family or friend.<sup>15</sup> Using a firearm to attempt suicide is a uniquely lethal method: Research indicates that the use of a gun results in death in 85 percent of suicide attempts, which is exponentially greater than the 3 percent fatality rate of other common methods to attempt suicide in the United States.<sup>16</sup> The method initially chosen for a suicide attempt matters tremendously. Data from a meta-analysis of 90 case studies that were conducted globally find that approximately 70 percent of individuals who survive a suicide attempt do not make another attempt.<sup>17</sup>

### School shootings

Unsecured guns also create risks for gun violence outside the home. A study by the U.S. Department of Education and the Secret Service reviewing school shootings found that 65 percent of the firearms used in those incidents came from the shooter's home.<sup>18</sup> For example, Moses Lake, Washington, was rocked on February 2, 1996, when 14-year-old Barry Loukaitis opened fire in his algebra class, killing two students and a teacher before being tackled and overpowered by another teacher.<sup>19</sup> The morning of the shooting, Loukaitis reached into the unlocked gun cabinet in his house and took his father's hunting rifle, a handgun, and ammunition with him to school.<sup>20</sup> In another instance, on October 24, 2014, Jaylen Fryberg used his father's handgun to methodically shoot five of his friends at a school cafeteria table in Marysville, killing four, before taking his own life with the gun.<sup>21</sup> Locking guns at home would make it more difficult for a child seeking to commit a heinous crime to access a lethal weapon—and would prevent similar tragedies from happening in the future.

### Theft

Finally, guns that are not stored securely are at a higher risk for theft. Gun owners are targets for gun theft, especially when their firearms are not stored securely.<sup>22</sup> People who own a large number of guns are particularly vulnerable to theft, given the value of firearms.<sup>23</sup> Analysis of FBI data found that a firearm is stolen every 2 minutes in the United States.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, this analysis indicated that an estimated 1.2 million guns were stolen from individuals from 2012 through 2015.<sup>25</sup> Gun theft greatly affects Washington; the FBI reported that from 2012 through 2015, roughly \$14.9 million worth of firearms were reported stolen in the state, which amounts to approximately 33,164 guns.<sup>26</sup> Nationally, Washington ranks 10th for the highest levels of reported gun theft over this four-year period.<sup>27</sup>

Gun theft is a public safety threat, as stolen guns are often later used in a violent crime. A study conducted by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) determined that roughly 9,736 guns known to be stolen from licensed gun dealers were linked to a crime from January 2010 through December 2015.<sup>28</sup> Gun theft is also a common part of illegal gun trafficking operations. In 2000, ATF published a report stating that from July 1996 through December 1998, approximately 10 percent of gun trafficking investigations involved stolen guns from private individuals, and 14 percent of gun trafficking investigations involved guns stolen from gun dealers.<sup>29</sup>

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## Conclusion: How Washington can secure guns and prevent tragedies

There are a few common-sense measures that states such as Washington can enact to help reduce the risks of unsecured guns. First, gun owners should be required to secure their firearms with gun locks or store them in a safe when they are not being used. Using these simple safety mechanisms has been proven to help reduce unintentional shooting deaths. The U.S. General Accounting Office published a report in 1991 that found that from 1988 to 1989, 31 percent of unintentional gun deaths would have been preventable if a loading indicator device and safety lock had been used.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a study in 2005 stating that securely storing guns and bullets could help reduce the risk of self-inflicted gun-related injuries at home.<sup>31</sup> Locking up a firearm also makes it harder to steal, thus helping protect the gun owner from being a victim of a crime and reducing the risk of the gun being trafficked or used in criminal activity by an unauthorized user.

Second, adults should be held accountable if they fail to store guns securely and a tragic shooting results. Implementing laws that make irresponsible gun owners accountable for their actions helps deter unintentional shootings, injuries, and death. Analysis from the RAND Corporation determined that there is supportive evidence suggesting that these kinds of laws reduce unintentional injuries and deaths among children, as well as reduce incidents of youth suicide.<sup>32</sup> To date, 27 states and the District of Columbia have enacted some form of legislation holding gun owners liable if a child accesses a gun.<sup>33</sup>

Safe storage laws and dangerous access prevention legislation help keep communities safe from gun violence. Several states, including Massachusetts, California, Connecticut, and New York, have successfully passed this kind of legislation to address gun violence.<sup>34</sup> States without secure storage laws are abdicating their duty to establish norms around responsible gun ownership. Without these laws, Washington homes and communities are vulnerable to unintentional shootings and gun theft. Filling the gap in Washington state's legislation by passing and implementing secure storage laws will prevent tragedies and save lives.

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## Endnotes

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