

# Gun Violence Is Having a Devastating Impact on Young People

By Eugenio Weigend and Allison Jordan June 10, 2022

From 2019 to 2020, gun homicides among children and teenagers rose dramatically. As a result, firearms are now the leading cause of death for Americans ages 1 to 17.<sup>1</sup> In addition, young Americans are suffering from a rapid and devastating rise in school shootings, increasingly mourning the loss of a parent due to firearm-related violence, and experiencing nonfatal gunshot injuries and gunshot threats at an alarming frequency.

Despite these concerning trends, some elected officials refuse to protect our youth from gun-related crimes. Instead, they are blocking commonsense gun safety laws and even pushing for counterproductive measures that would further endanger children and teenagers. This must change.

## Gun homicides rose dramatically across the country and increased disproportionately among children and teenagers

- From 2019 to 2020, gun homicides rose by 35 percent in the United States, but the increase was even higher among young Americans:
  - Gun homicides rose 37 percent for young Americans ages 18 to 24;<sup>2</sup> while this age group represents 9 percent of the population, it suffered 26 percent of gun homicides during 2020.<sup>3</sup>
  - Gun homicide rose 48 percent for children and teenagers ages 1 to 17.<sup>4</sup>

## Gun deaths are now the No. 1 cause of death for American children and teenagers

- Due to the increase in gun homicides among children and teenagers during 2020, gun deaths have surpassed vehicle-related deaths as the leading cause of death for Americans ages 1 to 17.<sup>5</sup>
- While 2,159 children and teenagers died in vehicle-related accidents in 2020, 2,270 were killed with a gun that year.<sup>6</sup>

## **Young Americans are disproportionately affected by gun-related crimes**

- According to a 2020 report, 3 in 5 victims of nonfatal shootings are under the age of 30,<sup>7</sup> with most of these injuries being the result of interpersonal violence and leading to long-term implications for victims and family members:
  - A 2022 study found that nonfatal gun injuries result in close to 2,500 additional dollars in medical spending per month.<sup>8</sup>
  - Victims of gun crimes are more likely to report substance abuse disorders, increases in pain, and psychiatric disorders.<sup>9</sup>
- Young Americans are more likely to be threatened with a gun during a violent crime:
  - A 2020 analysis showed that the rate of nonfatal gun-related crimes against Americans ages 12 to 30 was 2.2 times higher than the rate for Americans older than 30.<sup>10</sup>
  - Even when shots are not fired, gun victimization leads to higher levels of stress as well as emotional and physical symptoms months after the crime.<sup>11</sup>

## **School shootings continue to happen with staggering frequency**

- Since the Columbine High School massacre in 1999, 311,000 students have experienced gun violence at 331 schools, resulting in the deaths of at least 185 children and educators as well as another 369 injured by nonfatal gun wounds.<sup>12</sup>
- Incidents of gun violence in schools have spiked during the past two years, reaching an all-time high in 2021 with a record number of 42 school shootings.<sup>13</sup>
- Children exposed to gun violence in schools often experience short- and long-term consequences,<sup>14</sup> including:
  - Impaired cognitive functioning
  - Feelings of hypervigilance
  - Extreme noise sensitivity
  - Difficulty with emotional regulation, bursts of anger, and defiance at home and school
  - Trouble eating and sleeping as well as recurring nightmares
  - Increased thoughts of death
  - Heightened anxiety, depression, suicidality and self-harm, and separation anxiety.
- Fears of revictimization and survivor's guilt are common among children in the immediate and long-term aftermath of a school shooting.<sup>15</sup>
- Seventy-two percent of parents of school-aged children are concerned about the possibility of gun violence in their children's school.<sup>16</sup>

## Examples of school shooting incidents

---

**Robb Elementary School** in Uvalde, Texas  
(May 24, 2022): 21 people killed

**Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School** in Parkland, Florida (February 14, 2018): 17 people killed

**Oxford High School** in Oxford, Michigan  
(November 30, 2021): 4 people killed

**Townville Elementary School** in Townville, South Carolina (September 28, 2016): 2 people killed

**Santa Fe High School** in Santa Fe, Texas  
(May 18, 2018): 10 people killed

**Sandy Hook Elementary School** in Newtown, Connecticut (December 14, 2012): 26 people killed

## Losing a parent to gun violence has a devastating impact on young Americans

- Every day, an estimated 41 children in the United States lose a parent to gun violence.<sup>17</sup>
- In an investigation covering 20 major U.S. cities, *The Washington Post* found that by the end of 2020, more than 1,550 parents were shot and killed, leaving more than 3,600 children without one or both of their parents.<sup>18</sup>
  - There were only 11 days in 2020 for which researchers failed to find an instance of a child losing a parent to gun violence.
- The experience of losing a family member to gun violence can be particularly devastating for children. In contrast to losing a loved one to terminal illness, the sudden and shocking loss of a family member can often affect the emotional or physical development of a child, delaying and complicating the grief process.<sup>19</sup>

## Young people overwhelmingly support stronger gun laws

- An Everytown for Gun Safety poll found that 73 percent of young Americans ages 15 to 30 support stronger gun laws.<sup>20</sup>
- More than 80 percent of young Americans ages 18 to 29 support universal background checks.<sup>21</sup>

## Some elected officials are prioritizing counterproductive policies that endanger children and teenagers

- Over the past few years, several states have enacted legislation to lower the minimum age for gun-carrying and have avoided raising age restrictions:
  - Young people ages 18 to 20 make up 4 percent of the population yet perpetrate 18 percent of gun homicides.<sup>22</sup>
  - In 2022, a young man in Uvalde, Texas, used a firearm and 375 rounds of ammunition purchased one day after his 18th birthday to kill 21 and injure 17 in a mass shooting at Robb Elementary School.

- As of 2022, only 22 states have raised the minimum age to purchase firearms—from 18 to 21.
- In 2021, Texas lawmakers passed legislation making 18- to 20-year-olds eligible for a license to carry a handgun.<sup>23</sup>
- Elected officials from Texas, Louisiana, and Ohio have recently pushed to allow teachers to bring guns to schools or have armed school safety officers.<sup>24</sup>
- Putting more guns in schools is dangerous:
  - In 2020, a security guard accidentally fired a gun in the school parking lot, striking another staff member in the eye.<sup>25</sup>
  - In 2019, a first-grade student was injured after a substitute teacher carrying a handgun in his pocket unintentionally fired the weapon.<sup>26</sup>
  - In 2018, a teacher with a Glock 21 .45-caliber semi-automatic handgun inadvertently fired the weapon during class, leaving three students injured by bullet fragments and falling debris.<sup>27</sup>
- According to a 2018 survey, more than 95 percent of school teachers don't feel comfortable with a measure that would allow them to bring guns to schools.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

The United States has a gun homicide rate among young people that is 49 times higher than that of other developed nations.<sup>29</sup> Every day, three to four Americans under the age of 18 are murdered with a firearm. Clearly, our schools are no longer a safe place.

While young people are demanding action to pass gun violence prevention measures, elected officials are opting to line up with the gun lobby to pass policies that place children and teenagers at an even higher risk of gun violence. As Americans, we have to do more to protect young Americans from violent crime.

