



Gun Violence Prevention: The Opportunity to Act is Now

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Thank you for the opportunity to offer written testimony on Pennsylvania's Firearm Laws and Public Safety. As a pediatric emergency medicine fellow at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia & Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics, I am honored to provide this testimony to the Judiciary Committee on behalf of my fellow pediatricians and colleagues at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. We would like to share our thoughts, experiences, and expertise as pediatricians, researchers, public health professionals, nurses, mothers, fathers, etc. who universally recognize the public health epidemic that is firearm violence.

Just recently, I treated a young patient who was hurt in the crossfire, and I can tell you this type of event is far too familiar to those of us in the Emergency Department of Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Our only hope is that you can use stories like this one, and the scientific evidence at our disposal, to take action to stem the tide of gun violence in our neighborhoods and schools.

We present this testimony today in the wake of another school shooting, this time in Texas, all too close in time to the school shooting earlier this year in Florida. If we don't act now, the next one could be coming to a school closer to home. Our nation's children are crying for help. In my job as an emergency physician I hear that cry each and every day from child victims and families who lose a child to gun violence and face great fear both in schools and in their neighborhoods. Shamefully, these incidents are so frequent that our society seems to be developing immunity to them. In fact, many stories involving harm to children by guns barely make the evening news.

As a pediatrician, I witness how children who grow up without the basic feeling of safety and security face barriers to becoming healthy, productive adults. As a scientist, I know that there are solutions out there, which I will discuss below. It will require courageous action to confront the culture that chooses to ignore these solutions out of fear and misunderstanding. There is no better time and place to be courageous than today, right here, right now.

We continue to hear that gun violence is a public health epidemic. Yet somehow we fail to apply the same multi-layered strategies that have

worked for other public health epidemics, such as prevention of infectious diseases with immunizations, preventing child injury with child car seats, and preventing heart disease and cancer through regulating and educating about tobacco. All of these strategies involve collective, coordinated actions by physicians and other health care providers, lawmakers, and community members to move the needle for positive change.

We need to make a commitment to treat gun violence as a public health epidemic requiring a multi-layer strategy, just as we would with any other issue that would cause 2,549 child deaths and 13,576 child injuries in a single year (2014). Closer to home, at Penn and CHOP we treat roughly 15 cases of firearm violence per month, and have treated more than 1,800 children and young adults for gun violence related injuries from 2007-2016. Many more are treated at our other Philadelphia medical centers, and I know that my colleagues from Pittsburgh, Hershey, and others have the same experiences.

There are a number of legislative priorities which could help save the lives of children and adolescents from firearm violence. Although gun violence research has been limited for multiple decades, there are still bodies of research that point to effective strategies and actions we can take now to save lives. Based in that research, we support any legislation which does the following:

- Supports an accurate and complete system of universal background checks for all firearms transactions.
- Supports all efforts to limit access by children to firearms, including use of gunlocks and safe storage techniques.
- Supports efforts to improve availability and quality of mental health services for both children and adults to prevent gun violence as well as to help people fully heal from gun violence.
- Support limits on access to high-capacity magazines and assault-style weaponry.
- Supports additional research into the causes, effects, and strategies to reduce gun violence.

There is no research to indicate that arming teachers, parents, or other officials in the school-setting will reduce the risk of gun violence and keep our kids safe in schools. In fact, all available research tells us that keeping guns in the home for self-defense makes individuals more likely to be victims of firearm injuries and death – not less. In the absence of scientific evidence that indicates any safety benefits, we cannot support the policy of integrating guns into the school setting.

In addition to the aforementioned priorities, I encourage the legislature to take up the following pieces of legislation to reduce the risk of firearm injury and death for children and families in Pennsylvania.

- SB 209: Background Checks for Firearms and 48-hour Checks for Gun Shows
- SB501/HB2060: Enhance safety for all parties involved in Protection from Abuse (PFA) orders and convictions of misdemeanor crimes of domestic violence that require relinquishment of firearms.
- HB2227: Creation of an Extreme Risk Protective Order (ERPO).

When I hear some people say that “guns don’t hurt people, people hurt people,” I want to introduce them to the 3-year-old I mentioned at the beginning of this testimony. This little boy was not the target of the shooting, but, as is so often the case with children and adolescents, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Although I am thrilled to say he survived, this boy will forever bear the physical and psychological scars from this event. It is irrefutable fact that if we made the firearm used against him harder to get, he would have been much less likely to become a victim, and have a much better chance of living a normal, healthy, and productive life.

With all the legislative strategies outlined above, and the important options currently pending before this Legislature, I believe you are in a position to make an important difference. While I do not intend to imply that any of these approaches will eliminate firearm violence, I can assure you that they would be important steps on the journey of saving our most precious resource: our children. Please show our shared commitment to our children and communities by turning these bills into

laws making Pennsylvania a place that truly values safe and nurturing communities.

As pediatricians and CHOP employees, our work is meant to focus on those who have their lives ahead of them, to thereby enrich the next generation. To usher children and adolescents into adulthood with healthy bodies and minds, equipped to face the challenges of their society, is our primary objective and our biggest honor. Firearm violence robs us of this noble purpose on a daily basis, and we cannot stand by complacent while the path to preserve our purpose for all children and adolescents is right in front of us, if we only have the courage to take it.

Thank you.