



MAYORS ON THE FRONT LINES OF TWO PUBLIC HEALTH CRISES: ADDRESSING GUN VIOLENCE AMID THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Bottom Line: Mayors across the country are on the front lines each day doing everything in their power to protect the public's health and safety during these unprecedented times. They are doing so while simultaneously continuing to address an ongoing gun violence crisis that claims nearly 38,000 lives a year.¹ Mayors should consider actions to ensure that their response to the pandemic also protects vulnerable community members from gun violence. Local policies implemented and funding sustained in the coming months can prevent firearm-related injuries and deaths in our cities. Here are 10 things Mayors can do:

1. Support the essential work of community gun violence intervention programs so that necessary outreach and services can continue uninterrupted;
2. Ensure flexible and sustained funding for community gun violence intervention programs;
3. Maintain focus on high risk offenders and locations and protect officers by providing them with necessary protective equipment;
4. Track data regarding the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on gun violence to better understand and inform strategies;
5. Address the increased risk of suicide by ensuring Extreme Risk Orders are designated as "essential" court services;
6. Protect families by ensuring continuity of services to victims of domestic violence;
7. Support survivors of gun violence by highlighting and ensuring accessibility of available services;
8. Educate the public and first-time gun buyers about the risks and responsibilities that come with gun ownership;
9. Promote the secure storage of firearms to prevent unintentional shootings and youth suicide; and
10. Educate local gun dealers that remain open about their responsibility to inform customers and protect public safety.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS). A yearly average was developed using five years of the most recent available data: 2014 to 2018.

1. Support the Essential Work of Community Gun Violence Intervention Programs so That Necessary Outreach and Services Can Continue Uninterrupted

For the many neighborhoods in American cities plagued by long-standing racial inequities and disproportionate levels of gun violence, COVID-19 is just the latest public health crisis. Thankfully, the same local community violence intervention programs that have been shown to address and prevent gun violence in the hardest-hit neighborhoods are continuing to reduce gun violence in this crisis while emerging as a critical resource to fight the virus itself. Cities with gun violence intervention workers embedded in communities are already seeing these staff apply their public health training to share information about COVID-19 with vulnerable communities.² As hospitals become overwhelmed by COVID-19 patients, the work of hospital-based violence intervention programs (HVIPs) and community violence prevention workers to reduce gun violence and gunshot hospitalizations is critical. Like other public health professionals, violence prevention workers--particularly those embedded in hospitals--are undertaking their life-saving work in close proximity to other community members without access to protective masks, gloves, and related safety gear.

Mayors can protect vulnerable communities from the increased burden of gun violence during this time by ensuring that gun violence prevention workers who continue to serve their communities receive adequate protective equipment. This will undoubtedly be a challenge in some areas of the country that are experiencing insufficient supplies of PPE for frontline healthcare and public safety workers. In Chicago, for example, the city is providing street outreach workers with PPE and supplies such as hand sanitizer so that they can continue providing their violence intervention services. Additionally, as with other first responders, violence prevention workers should be eligible for hazard pay as they fight two public health crises at the same time.

2. Ensure Flexible and Sustained Funding for Community Gun Violence Intervention Programs

As communities grapple with the economic impact of COVID-19, gun violence intervention and prevention programs are expanding their work and addressing evolving community needs to mitigate gun violence risk factors. These needs include basic necessities such as food, housing, and access to supportive resources. To help programs fulfill these needs, Mayors must advocate for flexibility in the use of grant funds intended to reduce violence. Additionally, ensuring sustained funding for community gun violence prevention programs during and in the economic aftermath of COVID-19 will be critical to the long-term reduction of city gun violence. Cities will need to make some difficult decisions as a significant decrease in revenue will result in cuts to programs and services. As decisions are being made about city budgets, mayors should ensure that any city funding for gun violence prevention is maintained.

- a) Grant Gun Violence Prevention Programs Flexibility in Funding Expenditures
 - i) Mayors can ensure that funding is spent in support of communities in need by removing or relaxing restrictions on city grant spending. In Baltimore, community-based programs are using their funds to support the basic needs of community members in communities impacted by gun violence. By assisting with basic needs, community members at risk of becoming involved in gun violence are more likely to stay home and avoid potential conflict.
 - ii) Mayors can advocate alongside community-based organizations at the state-level to ensure that state funders provide flexibility in the use of funds.

² Lakeidra Chavis, "Already Fighting One Public Health Crisis, Chicago's Gun Violence Interrupters Take On Coronavirus," *The Trace*, March 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2UUqHsD>.

Mayors should prioritize grant discretion for local groups when advocating for state financial resources in response to COVID-19.

b) Explore Funding Opportunities

- i) Mayors should ask city staff to invest time and thought into state and federal grant opportunities for city gun violence prevention. Non-essential city staff can enroll in grant-writing webinars and conduct outreach to local gun violence prevention programs to assess their current and projected funding needs.
- ii) The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act; P.L. 116-136) became law on March 27, 2020, and provides funding opportunities for cities and nonprofit organizations.
 - 1) The CARES Act included \$150 billion dollars for the Coronavirus Relief Fund, which will be distributed to states based on population size. Local governments whose city populations are 500,000 or higher are also eligible to apply directly to the federal government for relief funds. These funds can be used in response to unexpected expenditures resulting from COVID-19.
 - 2) Mayoral staff can also raise awareness among community programs about federal emergency loan funding provided by the CARES Act. Staff can assist community programs in the application process.

3. Maintain Focus on High Risk Offenders and Locations and Protect Officers by Providing Them With Necessary Protective Equipment

Gun violence prevention and smart policing strategies must remain a focus of local law enforcement, even as there are significant demands on our public safety systems during this public health crisis. Hospitalizations due to gun violence will only further overwhelm medical systems. Mayors should work with law enforcement agencies to ensure that efforts are focused on addressing those individuals assessed as high risk, as well as locations with high rates of crime. Police departments can utilize past and current crime data to select these strategic impact areas and should engage with community leaders to inform implementation of tailored crime reduction strategies. In Los Angeles, for example, officials have worked with community organizations to designate gang graffiti abatement as an essential critical service as part of the city's overall violence reduction strategy. Officers should also be trained to connect community members to social service support to address needs that are likely exacerbated by COVID-19.

Mayors should also work with law enforcement to ensure that officers are adequately protected against COVID-19 transmission. Officers falling ill as a result of this exposure constricts agencies' capacity to carry out regular deployments and duties. As with all frontline workers, police officers should be equipped with personal protective equipment, when available, and police departments should ensure that officers are trained in how to best protect their health and the health of community members with whom they interact. This is especially necessary in situations where officers enter a person's home. Local officials can also ensure that civilians working remotely have access to tools they need to continue analytic work that is key to investigations and strategy.

4. Track Data Regarding the Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Gun Violence to Better Understand and Inform Strategies

In the midst of a global pandemic, cities are facing unprecedented changes to everyday life--and many of these changes may persist for many months. Cities need access to quality data about gun violence during this time to understand the impact that COVID-19 is having on crime and to prepare to maintain community safety. By collecting and analyzing information such as fatal and non-fatal shooting incident totals, the characteristics of each incident, and the type of firearm involved, cities can gain insights into the drivers of violence during this time. Mayors should ensure that all relevant data is tracked and shared between city agencies, including the volume of calls received by 911 and 311 involving guns, crimes committed while in possession of a firearm in which no one was struck by gunfire (e.g. robbery, assault), and reports of shots fired. Law enforcement should also monitor domestic violence reports and child abuse reports, as well as calls for persons experiencing a crisis. This data should also be shared with local gun violence prevention organizations to inform their continued outreach efforts.

5. Address the Increased Risk of Suicide by Ensuring Extreme Risk Orders Remain Accessible

Extreme risk protection orders (“ERPOs”) permit law enforcement agencies, and in many states, family and household members, to temporarily prevent a person who is at significant risk of harming themselves or others from accessing a gun.

Extreme risk protection orders are critically important at this time, when social isolation, fear and anxiety about health and personal finances are rising. The National Suicide Prevention Hotline reports that calls for help have increased 300% nationally during the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Access to a firearm can be the difference between life and death in a time of crisis: firearm suicide is uniquely lethal, with 90 percent of suicide attempts using a gun resulting in death. By comparison, only 4 percent of suicide attempts by other means are fatal.⁴

As they work to protect their communities, Mayors should work with local judges and law enforcement agencies to ensure that their constituents maintain access to these life-saving court orders. Ensuring that ERPOs remain a viable tool during this difficult time could involve actions including:

- a) Working with chief judges and state court administrators to ensure that ERPOs are deemed “essential” court services (to the extent courts are open only for essential services) with electronic filings and virtual hearings available. Mayors may also need to work with local court houses to ensure that they have resources and technical capability to accept ERPO petitions electronically, and to conduct hearings via phone or video link.
- b) Working with law enforcement to ensure that ERPO petitions continue to be served on respondents and that court orders to surrender firearms are enforced. Mayors should also ensure that records relating to ERPOs are maintained by local law enforcement and timely submitted to state and/or federal background check systems.
- c) Informing law enforcement and the public about this life saving tool and how to access it during this ongoing crisis. Mayors should also ensure that local suicide prevention crisis lines are adequately resourced to respond to provide help to those in need, and that those services are informed about strategies to prevent gun suicide including ERPOs.

³ Don Sweeney, “Suicide Hotline Calls Soar as Coronavirus Spreads. ‘There is a flood coming.’,” *Sacramento Bee*, March 25, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2y9t3Md>.

⁴ Andrew Conner, Deborah Azrael, and Matthew Miller, “Suicide Case-Fatality Rates in the United States, 2007 to 2014: A Nationwide Population-Based Study,” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 171, no. 12, (2019): 885–95.

d) Amplifying local resources, including suicide prevention hotlines and how to apply for an ERPO on city websites and other social media platforms. Local health departments and behavioral health partners should also promote tips and services for those in a mental health crisis. Public education is an important and necessary tool to ensure that individuals can seek help and protection for themselves and their loved ones.

6. Protect Families by Ensuring Continuity of Services to Victims of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence restraining orders (DVROs) provide survivors of domestic violence with critical protection from abuse. These protections include prohibiting abusers from going to the survivor's home, where they may be sheltering in place, and prohibiting abusers from having firearms. Law enforcement agencies in cities that have been hit hard by the pandemic have reported an increase in domestic violence incidents, and victim assistance agencies have reported increased calls for help from people who are isolated or quarantined in close proximity with their abusers.⁵ Research suggests that domestic violence victimization may increase during periods of emergency;⁶ simultaneously, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has seen record highs in new gun purchases requiring a background check.⁷ The combination of these events is particularly concerning in light of research showing that access to a gun during a domestic violence incident increases the likelihood that a woman will be killed fivefold.⁸

In addition to properly resourcing domestic violence responders and facilities who may experience a surge in cases during this public health crisis, Mayors can further protect the safety of families by:

a) Working with chief judges and state court administrators to ensure domestic violence restraining orders are deemed "essential" court services (to the extent courts are open only for essential services) with electronic filings and virtual hearings available. Mayors should also ensure that the community receives public information that help is available to domestic violence victims.

b) Working with law enforcement to ensure that domestic violence restraining orders continue to be served on respondents and that court orders to surrender firearms are enforced. Mayors should work with their police departments to ensure that records relating to domestic violence restraining orders are maintained by local law enforcement and timely submitted to state and/or federal background check systems.

c) Working with the local courts to ensure extension of temporary domestic violence restraining orders, including those that restrict firearms access, while court access is limited. Extending temporary DVROs until the case can be scheduled for a court hearing permits courts to reduce the spread of the virus and protect litigants, judges, and court staff.

d) Advocating for law enforcement officers to obtain the necessary mandate from the state to remove firearms from the scene of domestic violence incidents during the state of

⁵ Mary Margaret Olohan, "Domestic Violence Hotlines See Flood of Calls During Coronavirus Lockdown," *National Interest*, March 24, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2QNMAbO>. Domestic violence in China is reported to have tripled in areas locked down due to the coronavirus pandemic. Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "China's Domestic Violence Epidemic," *Axios*, March 7, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2WO2hn6>.

⁶ Julie A. Schumacher, et al., "Intimate Partner Violence and Hurricane Katrina: Predictors and Associated Mental Health Outcomes," *Violence and Victims* 25, no. 5 (2010): 588-603.

⁷ Asher Stockler, "Exclusive: FBI Sees Record Background Checks for Gun Sales Amid Coronavirus Outbreak, Up 300 Percent In Single Day," *Newsweek*, March 18, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2UoMIG5>.

⁸ Jacquelyn C. Campbell et al., "Risk Factors for Femicide in Abusive Relationships: Results from a Multisite Case Control Study," *American Journal of Public Health* 93, no. 7 (2003): 1089-97.

emergency. This allows law enforcement officers to secure the safety of domestic violence survivors, particularly at a time when domestic violence prosecution is likely to be delayed.

e) Amplifying local and state domestic violence hotlines and resources on city websites and other social media platforms. For example, the city of Philadelphia has advertised a local 24-hour hotline as part of its COVID-19 messaging and information to residents. Public education is an important and necessary tool to ensure that individuals in dangerous situations know their rights and available community resources.

7. Support Survivors of Gun Violence

Survivors of gun violence live with the long term mental health impacts of their trauma every day, which can include anxiety, grief and post-traumatic stress disorder. Survivors may need additional support during the COVID-19 pandemic as isolation and feeling of loss of control can exacerbate existing symptoms.

a. Highlight Available Services

Mayors should ensure that those impacted by gun violence know the resources available to them. These services include therapeutic services, case management, legal advocacy, and other victims resources, and could be especially important during this time. Mayors can highlight these support services by publicizing the 2-1-1 helpline and highlighting other community resources. Resources are also available to gun violence survivors through the [Everytown Survivor Network](#).

b. Ensure Accessibility of Services

Mayors can also ensure that access to remote services are available and easily accessible to residents. Many nonprofits and prosecutors' offices providing these services may need assistance in building technological capacity to deliver services, and the Mayor's office can assist in this capacity-building.

c. Sustain Funding for Services

As with gun violence intervention programs, Mayors must ensure that vital services for survivors of crime are sustained during COVID-19. The demand for services is likely to increase during this time of uncertainty and adapting to remote service provision will require additional investments. As city and state budgets constrict, Mayors should look to federal funding opportunities for victim assistance services. The federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) allocates billions of dollars to states and territories annually to fund direct services to victims of violent crime. Cities and community-based nonprofit programs are eligible to apply for VOCA victim assistance grants and should do so to sustain services for survivors of gun violence. Cities that receive state funding for these services should also advocate with governors and legislators for continued funding in the next budget cycle.

8. Educate the Public and First-Time Gun Buyers About the Risks that Come With Gun Ownership

Fear and anxiety in the age of COVID-19 has led to spikes in gun purchases, in particular among first-time buyers. Many of these "panic buyers" think that the purchase will make them and their families safer, but do not know that access to a firearm increases the risk of death by homicide by

two times,⁹ the risk of death by suicide by three times,¹⁰ and the risk that a woman will be killed in a domestic dispute by five times.¹¹ As with all aspects of this crisis, the populace deserves to know the truth about how to stay safe, and consumers should be informed of these risks prior to purchasing a firearm, especially given the increase in first-time buyers who might be especially unaware of the risks that firearms pose. Mayors can direct local agencies, like the Department of Health or the Department of Public Safety, to make this information available to gun purchasers by posting signs of known risks, and take additional steps to build public awareness about responsible gun ownership.

9. Promote the Secure Storage of Firearms

With schools closed due to COVID-19, millions of children and teens are spending a lot of time at home. Approximately 4.6 million children live in a household with at least one gun that is stored loaded and unlocked,¹² a number that has likely expanded due to the recent surge in gun purchases. If gun owners don't take steps to secure their firearms, efforts to curb the pandemic could result in preventable tragedy in the home.

[Research shows](#) an overwhelming majority of unintentional shootings by children and teen suicides could have been prevented with secure storage. Experts agree on the following three principles:

- **Unload:** Gun owners should remove all ammunition from the firearm, including removing any chambered rounds.
- **Lock:** Unloaded firearms should be secured with a firearm locking device, such as a jacket lock, or in a locked location, like a safe or lock box. Locking devices, safes, and lock boxes are equipped with keys, combinations, or biometric technology that limit access.
- **Separate:** Ammunition should be stored separately from the firearm in a secure location.

Mayors can include secure storage messaging in their COVID-19 briefings and promote secure storage on social media by sharing the newly released Everytown public service announcement (PSA) on the importance of secure storage. In Paterson, New Jersey, the mayor filmed his own video message encouraging residents to secure firearms that was then shared on social media. They can also direct local agencies to make these resources available to first-time gun buyers coupled with information about the risks of gun ownership.

Moms Demand Action has created the Be SMART program which asks parents and caretakers, gun owners and non-gun owners alike, to 'Be SMART' and take these simple steps:

- **Secure** all guns in homes and vehicles
- **Model** responsible behavior
- **Ask** about firearms in other homes your child visits
- **Recognize** the role of guns in suicide
- **Tell** your peers to Be SMART

⁹ Andrew Anglemeyer, Tara Horvath, and George Rutherford, "The Accessibility of Firearms and Risk for Suicide and Homicide Victimization Among Household Members: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 160, no. 2 (2014): 101-110.

¹⁰ Andrew Anglemeyer, Tara Horvath, and George Rutherford, "The Accessibility of Firearms and Risk for Suicide and Homicide Victimization Among Household Members: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 160, no. 2 (2014): 101-110.

¹¹ Jacquelyn C. Campbell, et al., "Risk Factors for Femicide in Abusive Relationships: Results From a Multisite Case Control Study," *American Journal of Public Health* 93, no. 7 (2003): 1089-1097.

¹² Deborah Azrael et al., "Firearm Storage in Gun-Ownning Households with Children: Results of a 2015 National Survey," *Journal of Urban Health* 95, no. 3 (June 2018): 295-304. Study defined children as under the age of 18.

This program can serve as a resource for families and public health officials during these challenging times. Social media content and other resources can be downloaded from the Be SMART website: <https://besmartforkids.org/>

10. Educate Local Gun Dealers That Remain Open About Their Responsibility To Inform Customers and Protect Public Safety

Even with governors having control over whether gun stores stay open in most places, Mayors can still take important actions to educate local gun dealers about ways that they can encourage a culture of responsible gun ownership. In particular, they can 1) educate dealers about the dangers of transferring a gun before a background check is completed and 2) encourage dealers to promote secure storage and remind them of their legal obligation to provide gun locks with all new handgun purchases.

The COVID-19-related surge in gun sales has put an enormous strain on the nation's background check system, increasing the danger of the so-called "Charleston Loophole."

Federal law requires that licensed gun dealers run background checks on all potential gun buyers. But due to a National Rifle Association-backed provision of the 1993 Brady Bill, the law allows sales to proceed by default after three business days—even if a background check is not yet complete.¹³

While nineteen states have closed or narrowed this gap,¹⁴ in many states it is legal for a dealer to transfer a gun after three business days even if the results of a background check are not yet known, increasing the chance that guns will fall into the hands of people who are legally prohibited from having them. While the vast majority of background checks are completed on the spot, approximately 10 percent are delayed.¹⁵ And a delayed background check is a strong indication that the potential buyer may ultimately turn out to be prohibited from having guns. An analysis of the past five years of NICS data shows that background checks completed after the three business day period are four times more likely to result in a denial than checks completed within three business days.¹⁶

The background check system is already experiencing significant increases, with a 41 percent increase in March 2020 compared to March 2019.¹⁷ And in one day, March 16th (the day President Trump and the CDC announced that gatherings of more than 10 people would have to be canceled

¹³ This loophole is the one through which the shooter at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, obtained the firearm he used in the shooting on June 17, 2015. The shooter, who was prohibited from possessing firearms, was able to purchase the gun he used in the shooting because the default proceed period had elapsed, and the dealer made the sale even though the background check was not complete.

¹⁴ Five states have laws that explicitly delay a gun sale if the background check is incomplete for time periods that do not exceed 3 business days. Iowa: Annual permits to acquire handguns are not valid until 3 days after application. Iowa Code § 724.20. Nebraska: Authorities have 3 days to approve or deny an application for a handgun certificate, which is required in order to purchase a handgun. R.R.S. Neb. § 69-2405. Oregon: Authorities have until the end of the next business day following the background check request to determine if the person is eligible to possess a gun. ORS § 166.412(3), 166.434. Virginia: Authorities have until the end of the next business day following the background check request to determine if the person is eligible to possess a gun. Va. Code Ann. § 18.2-308.2:2(B)(2); 6 VAC 20-130-70(H). For a non-resident, or at the request of a resident for whom the dealer requests a background check by mail, the dealer may not transfer the firearm if the background check is still pending until 10 days have passed. 6 VAC 20-130-80.

¹⁵ Joshua Eaton "FBI Never Completes Hundreds of Thousands of Gun Checks," *Roll Call*, December, 3, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2UEdsNM>. According to data from *Roll Call*, there were 43,464,647 federal checks facilitated by NICS between 2014 and 2018. Of those, 4,639,397 checks—or 10 percent of all federal checks—were delayed.

¹⁶ Joshua Eaton "FBI Never Completes Hundreds of Thousands of Gun Checks." Everytown analyzed data provided by *Roll Call* for 2014 to 2018. Of all federal checks facilitated by the NICS during that period, 1.2 percent were denied, and of checks that were delayed beyond three business days, 5.1 percent were denied.

¹⁷ Richard A. O'Connell, Jr., "For Some Buyers with Virus Fears, the Priority isn't Toilet Paper. It's Guns." *New York Times*, March 16, 2020, <https://nyti.ms/3bomdB0>.

for the next 15 days¹⁸), the background check system experienced a 300 percent increase compared to that day in 2019.¹⁹ Considering these sharp increases in firearms sales during the present state of emergency, states are already seeing an increase in background checks that remain incomplete after three days.²⁰

It is always up to the dealer to decide whether to transfer a gun or to wait until the background checks results are known. Mayors cannot close this gap, but they can publically encourage gun dealers in their communities to wait until a background check is complete and educate them about the risks of transferring guns before the results of a background check are known.

Mayors should also remind dealers about their obligations under federal law to provide a secure gun storage device with each transfer of a handgun.²¹ With millions of children at home during the pandemic, the risk of children or others accessing an unsecured firearm are high.

¹⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Resources for Large Community Events & Mass Gatherings," March 16, 2020, <https://bit.ly/39pffu6>.

¹⁹ Asher Stockler, "Exclusive: FBI Sees Record Background Checks for Gun Sales Amid Coronavirus Outbreak, Up 300 Percent In Single Day," *Newsweek*, March 18, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2UoMIG5>.

²⁰ Michael Karlik, "Background Checks for Guns Triple as Wait Times Cross Federal Threshold," *Colorado Politics*, March 24, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2lvymYl>.

²¹ 18 § U.S.C. 922(z).