

2023

## Organizations Behind Ending the Gun Violence Epidemic

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### Recommended Citation

Melissa Spero, *Organizations Behind Ending the Gun Violence Epidemic*, 43 CHILD. LEGAL RTS. J. 70 ().  
Available at: <https://lawcommons.luc.edu/clrj/vol43/iss2/8>

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## *Social Movement Spotlight*

### **Organizations Behind Ending the Gun Violence Epidemic**

*Melissa Spero\**

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Children in the United States (U.S.) encounter gun violence at staggeringly high rates. Every year about 4,000 children, aged 0-19, are shot and killed while an additional 15,000 children are shot and wounded. In addition to the physical injuries, children are harmed when a friend or family member is killed with a gun, when they hear of someone they know being shot, and when they witness gun violence or hear gunshots. Those who have directly experienced a mass shooting can have mental health consequences that lead to an increase in depression, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and other psychological symptoms. Those who have indirectly experienced a mass shooting can experience an increase in fear surrounding gun violence as well as declines in perceived safety and other short-term psychological effects. Being exposed to gun violence impacts children's psychological and mental well-being. Gun violence may potentially impact children's school performance. Black and Latinx children are impacted by gun violence at higher rates than their white peers. Exposure to gun violence in neighborhoods and schools can affect entire generations of children.

There are many organizations that are working to end gun violence and school shootings. These organizations promote different ways to advocate for the end of gun violence. Many of these organizations call for an assault weapons ban. This article will focus on these organizations and explore what an assault weapons ban is as well as recommendations on other ways to end gun violence. Additionally, this article will provide recommendations on how to help children heal after experiencing gun violence.

#### **II. ASSAULT WEAPONS BANS**

Assault weapons are high-powered semiautomatic firearms where each round has up to four times the velocity of a handgun round. Assault weapons allow shooters to fire more rounds over a short period. High-capacity magazines can hold more than 10 rounds allowing for a shooter to fire more without pausing to reload their gun. Assault weapons can inflict greater damage than a round of shots from a typical handgun. They make shootings more deadly, causing six times as many people to be shot during mass shootings when an assault weapon was used. Assault weapons are most often used in mass shootings and recovered at crime scenes.

A federal assault weapons ban was in place from 1994 to 2004 and was not renewed when it expired in 2004. Currently, only nine states have adopted assault weapon prohibitions. The ban prohibited the manufacture, transfer, or possession of assault weapons. The ban also prohibited the sale of large capacity magazines, the ammunition storage and feeding device. Laws regulating assault weapons reduce gun

violence. States that have restrictions on the magazine size of guns experience mass shootings at less than half the rate of states who do not have any restrictions on magazine sizes. Dr. Michael Siegel, a researcher at Boston University, states “whether a state has a large capacity ammunition magazine ban is the single best predictor of the mass shooting rates in that state.” It is estimated that 314 of 448 mass shooting deaths could have been prevented if a federal assault weapon ban had been in place.

### **III. ORGANIZATIONS FOCUSED ON ENDING GUN VIOLENCE**

#### ***A. Everytown for Gun Safety***

Everytown for Gun Safety (“Everytown”) is the largest gun violence prevention organization in America, comprised of several other branches of individuals (Mothers Demand Action, Students Demand Action, Mayors Against Illegal Guns, and the Everytown Survivor Network) supporting gun safety. Everytown aims to introduce evidence-based solutions into towns in America to end gun violence. It is an organization that has the support of 10 million mayors, moms, teachers, survivors, gun owners, students, and everyday Americans. The goal of the organization is to make communities safer while ending gun violence. Everytown approaches the fight to end gun violence in many ways. They support and educate people, take actual action steps, and are building a larger movement against gun violence. Everytown works to support candidates with gun sense positions, empower survivors, expose the National Rifle Association (NRA), and build awareness about gun safety. Everytown supports and educates people by researching the causes and solutions of gun violence, supporting survivors of gun violence, advancing gun safety in the courts, and building partnerships to raise awareness of gun violence. The volunteers and members of Everytown act by enacting and implementing smart gun policies, electing gun sense candidates, demanding accountability of representatives and the government, and advocating for safety reforms locally and nationally. Finally, Everytown builds a movement by starting to organize grassroots campaigns in every state. Everytown demands action from elected officials and creates communities rallying around ending gun violence. Everytown exists to end gun violence and save lives. They have created unprecedented victories against gun lobbyists in state legislatures, through voting and in corporate America.

#### ***B. Students Demand Action***

Students Demand Action is a subgroup of Everytown, an organization made up of young activists committed to ending gun violence in their communities. These students have grown up in the middle of America’s gun violence crisis, the “school shooting generation.” This generation is now organizing in their high schools, colleges, and communities to demand action to end gun violence. Students Demand Action has the same three approaches as Everytown: educating, taking action, and building a movement. The approach of Students Demand Action varies slightly from the general approach of Everytown as they work to advocate for common-sense gun safety laws, elect gun sense candidates at every level, educate peers and communities on gun safety issues and solutions, register new voters, and mobilize peers to ultimately end gun violence.

Students Demand Action lists three reasons as to why their peers should join the movement. The first is to create change in America. Students Demand Action recognizes that gun violence is the leading cause of death for American children and teens. The movement is founded on the belief that students deserve better and that they can make a meaningful change at the local, state, and national levels. The second reason is that students will grow as activists by being part of Students Demand Action. Students who are part of this organization have hands-on experience building grassroots movements as well as engaging directly in gun violence prevention campaigns. Students can grow as leaders and community organizers through various trainings, meetings, and events. Finally, Students Demand Action provides volunteers and members the opportunity to connect with peers across the country. The members and volunteers are from all fifty states and Washington D.C. which allows students to collaborate with people from different backgrounds who all have the common goal of ending gun violence.

### *C. March for Our Lives*

March for Our Lives is a youth-led movement that was created after the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida in 2018. The organization is a movement dedicated to promoting civic engagement, education, and direct action by youth to eliminate the epidemic of gun violence. The movement started as the survivors of this mass shooting knew they had to make sure what happened to their community never happened again. March for Our Lives has developed into hundreds of chapters across the country led by students who enact change on their local levels. This change can be through school walk outs, lobbying for better safety measures at their schools, writing statewide legislation, or showing up to school board as well as city council meetings. They are motivated because they know that we cannot allow the normalization of gun violence to continue, and we must create a safe and compassionate country for everyone. Since March for Our Lives was created, two hundred and fifty lifesaving laws have been put into action and two marches in Washington D.C., organized by the movement, in 2018 and 2022, have taken place to protest for better gun safety legislation.

March for Our Lives was inspired by the Freedom Riders of the 1960s. Members of March for Our Lives toured the country on the Road to Change and registered over 50,000 new voters. This number has reached over 200,000 new voters since the movement began. The founders met with family members, community leaders, and other survivors of gun violence across the country to expand their understanding of gun violence and how each community is affected by it differently. The movement has “Quick Actions” that allow for anyone to easily participate in. These “Quick Actions” are as simple as emailing representatives to support March for Our Lives goal of investing in mental health services for children instead of having police in schools or emailing senators to end the filibuster. Additionally, people can sign petitions in support of universal background checks and sign a pledge to use your voice and vote in elections. People can take further action by donating to the movement or signing up to volunteer.

The movement has a policy plan to reimagine public safety called “It Ends With Us.” The policy agenda is rooted in what communities have expressed as the need to feel

safe. It has been influenced by the perspectives of survivors of gun violence and their families as well as strengthened by policy analysis and conversations with stakeholders. It also makes note of the underlying forces that fuel gun violence. The policy does not just call for gun control by itself, but a world re-imagined that does away with oppressive systems of power and focuses on community. The policy also makes clear that the forces that fuel gun violence in America are gun glorification, armed supremacy, political apathy and corruption, poverty, and the national mental health crisis. These concepts are all rooted in oppression, and for this policy to be successful we need to understand these forces and take them apart. The movement asks for all elected officials to call this crisis a national public health emergency, to fight for the end of gun violence, and create real change for America.

#### **IV. OTHER GUN SAFETY LAWS**

Child access prevention laws are one form of gun safety. These laws require that a firearm is stored and locked properly so a child would not be able to access it. Child access prevention laws have been found to prevent accidental shootings and suicides as well as violent crimes. As of 2020, twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia had enacted some form of child access prevention law. The effectiveness of the various child access prevention laws depends on the specific state and the weight the state has put on these laws. A majority of school shootings are committed by minors. Therefore, enacting regulations to properly store firearms would reduce the likelihood that minors can access firearms in their home and commit mass shootings or other forms of violence.

Another form of gun prevention are red flag laws that permit state courts to order the temporary removal of firearms from a person who they believe presents a danger to others or themselves. In most instances of gun violence, the perpetrator showed signs that they were at risk of hurting themselves or others; these are considered red flags. Red flag laws help to prevent incidents of gun violence. These laws are only able to be put into action for those who are old enough to own a firearm. Nineteen states have some form of red flag laws that vary based on the state but generally allow law enforcement or family members to petition a court to temporarily suspend an individual's right to possess or purchase a firearm. Although these laws will not prevent minors from accessing guns, they can help reduce instances of gun violence on a large scale. Any form of gun violence is harmful and traumatic to those who experience it directly and indirectly. By putting regulations into place, the laws are working to prevent these traumatic effects on a large scale.

#### **V. HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT GUN VIOLENCE**

There are many factors to consider when speaking to children about gun violence. Parents and teachers should consider the age and maturity of the children, the idea that safety and security are especially important to children, how symptoms of trauma look different in everyone especially when comparing children and adults, and that there are tools to support children. When children experience traumatic events, seeking professional help may be a necessary step to take if symptoms begin to interfere with

everyday life or if the event is causing pain that is only getting worse. However, there are some ways to talk to children before seeking out professional help.

Creating a safe environment for children allows for them to live fully and thrive. It is important for adults to reiterate to children that they are there for them and doing everything they can to make them feel safe. Establishing routines for children will create a sense of safety and stability in their daily lives. Reducing children's screen time decreases the exposure to events that can feel overwhelming. This allows for children to interact with those around them and gives parents opportunities to talk with their children about concerns they may have. This further allows adults to be present and listen to their children, creating opportunities for conversations about the children's concerns related to gun violence. This gives adults an opportunity to validate and show children that they are cared for. When having these conversations, it is important to use age-appropriate language giving simple, honest answers to any questions the children have. This is an opportunity to sit and listen to the questions children have and understand how they are coping with the violence they have experienced.

Adults who spend a significant amount of time with children first need to process their own emotional response before talking to children about school shootings as well as mass shootings in general. When talking to kids in elementary school and younger, caregivers need to focus on the message they want their kids to take away from the conversation. For older children it is important to listen to their feelings. If caregivers want to talk to their children about the events, they should start with questions to assess what their children are feeling about it. If the child has not heard about the events, then it is a time for parents to share their beliefs as well as gain insight about how their children are feeling. Finally, teenagers are going to want solutions to their questions. Caregivers should listen to their feelings while teaching teenagers to create change fostering resiliency. There is not one right way for caregivers to talk to their children about school and mass shootings, and the conversation largely depends on the child's age and temperament.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Gun violence in the United States is a public health epidemic. Mass shootings are becoming far too common place in the United States. As of late March 2023, the Gun Violence Archive had counted 130 mass shootings, meaning that there had been more than one mass shooting per day in 2023. Children who directly as well as indirectly witness a shooting experience a variety of emotions that could lead to long term effects due to trauma they've experienced. It is important to recognize ways in which to educate children and parents on how to cope with the effects from mass shootings. There are many laws, like a federal assault weapons ban, that can be enacted to curtail the gun violence epidemic that the United States is facing. In addition to these laws are organizations working behind the scenes to explain to citizens and members of congress how these laws can change the trajectory America is currently facing. When these ideas and efforts are enacted into laws, mass shootings can be curtailed, and children can grow up without the fear of encountering a mass shooting.

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