



Turning Faith Into Action

***An Interfaith Toolkit to Engage the Faith
Community on Gun Violence Prevention***

December 2022

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Dedication

*To our dear friends Rev. James E. Atwood (1934-2020),
Robert J. Hatfield (1939-2020), and Patricia R. Johnson (1945-2017)
and all other dedicated faith leaders, both clergy and lay, who have
worked to end the scourge of gun violence in this country.*



Rev. James E. Atwood



Robert J. Hatfield



Patricia R. Johnson

Introduction

The DC Area Interfaith Gun Violence Prevention Network (Interfaith Network) is pleased to offer this toolkit as a resource that clergy or individual congregants can use to promote gun violence prevention (GVP) efforts in their religious congregations. Our hope is that it will serve as a practical, helpful guide to educate, engage, and activate more congregations to advance GVP both in their own faith communities and in civil society and thereby help to save lives, the major goal of the GVP movement.

Religious congregations can help Americans voice their concerns about the national epidemic of gun violence. Each year, over 46,000 Americans are killed by guns and more than 100,000 are wounded.¹ *Since 1968, more Americans have died from domestic gunfire (more than 1.5 million) than were killed in all U.S. wars since the American Revolution (about 1.2 million).*² In addition to those killed or wounded by guns, millions of Americans have experienced the trauma of gun violence incidents or live with the constant threat of gun violence, and millions of Americans have been the victims of crimes committed with a gun. (See Chapters 15-18 for more information.)

The toolkit has five main sections covering (1) faith perspectives on gun violence; (2) communal prayer services or reflections from various faith traditions; (3) facts about gun violence and gun laws in the United States; (4) ways congregations can address gun violence, including through advocacy and enhancing the security of their houses of worship; and (5) various resources, including information about our Interfaith Network.

The toolkit represents a number of faith traditions, including Jewish, Christian, Unitarian Universalist, Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim. The first section of the toolkit shows how GVP efforts reflect core principles and values of the respective traditions,

GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND GUN SAFETY – NOT GUN CONTROL

Clergy, congregations, organizations, and activists trying to prevent and reduce gun violence use the terms *gun violence prevention* and *gun safety* to describe their efforts to address the epidemic of gun violence in the United States. *Gun control* is a talking point used by the National Rifle Association (NRA) and other gun rights advocates to raise fear among gun owners that all guns will be confiscated.

In a June 5, 2022, full-page ad in *The New York Times*, Vet Voice Foundation called on the media to drop the term gun control: “Calling all Editors, Reporters and Columnists. It’s not gun CONTROL. It’s gun SAFETY. In the military, we trained thoroughly to handle and store weapons safely. We’re subject to rigorous, mandatory background checks and other safety measures. Those procedures have nothing to do with control – they are in place to save lives. Please stop using the talking points of gun profiteers when reporting on an issue that impacts the safety of our children and our communities. Words matter.” See <https://bit.ly/gun-safety-ad>.

¹ See pages 65 and 67.

² See page 82, note 12.

and the second provides suggestions and resources for communal services expressing those principles and values.

The Interfaith Network is deeply grateful to all those who provided content for the toolkit, whose names generally appear in their respective chapters. A special note of thanks goes to the members of the committee who oversaw the project, providing direction and drafting and editing services:³

- Christina Files, Gun Violence Prevention Ministry, St. John's Episcopal Church, Chevy Chase, MD; Co-Chair, DC Area Interfaith GVP Network
- Martha Hare, Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, Bethesda, MD, and Tifereth Israel Congregation, Washington, DC
- Julie Keller, Agudas Achim Gun Violence Prevention Committee, Alexandria, VA
- Steve Klitzman, Chair, Temple Sinai Gun Violence Prevention Group, Washington, DC; Co-Chair, DC Area Interfaith GVP Network
- Robert More, Pax Christi, St. John Neumann Catholic Church, Reston, VA; Co-Chair, DC Area Interfaith GVP Network

Since the initial release of the toolkit in December 2022, the following chapters have been added or updated:

- *Chapter 6, noting the Unitarian Universalist Association's 2024 replacement of the Seven Principles with a statement of Shared Values*
- *Chapter 9, providing Muslim perspectives on violence and gun violence⁴*
- *Chapters 15 and 16, to reflect more recent data on firearm deaths and injuries from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, data on mass shootings from both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Gun Violence Archives, and data on school shootings from Education Week*
- *Chapter 17, to include additional mass shootings*
- *Chapter 18, to add a reference to a book published in May 2023*
- *Chapter 22, to update the list of gun safety advocacy groups*
- *Chapter 25, to add further resources*
- *Chapter 27, to update information about the Interfaith Network*

³ Members' faith communities are listed for identification purposes only and do not imply endorsement of the toolkit's contents by the leadership of those faith communities.

⁴ The addition of Chapter 9 in February 2024 caused a renumbering of all the subsequent chapters.

Faith Perspectives on Gun Violence and Prevention



Chapter 1. Jewish Perspectives on Guns, Gun Violence, and Gun Violence Prevention

This chapter presents a variety of Jewish faith perspectives on guns, gun violence, and gun violence prevention, from the Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Orthodox traditions. Material quoted from online sources is indented.

Reform Judaism

Gun Violence Prevention: Jewish Values¹

Jewish Tradition

Jewish tradition emphasizes the sanctity and primary value of human life. The Bible commands us, “Thou shalt not murder” (Exodus 20:13). The Talmud teaches us that “he who takes one life it is as though he has destroyed the universe and he who saves one life it is as though he has saved the universe” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). In an increasingly impersonal and alienating society, the dehumanizing of the human being and the carelessness with which human life is taken stand in direct violation of these affirmations of our tradition.

Scripture encourages peaceful pursuit of our mutual welfare. Isaiah exhorts the people of the earth to “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2:4). We are commanded to turn weapons of destruction into tools for the greater good of society. . . .

¹ <https://rac.org/gun-violence-prevention-jewish-values>. See the website for a list of resolutions related to gun violence prevention from the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ), and North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY).

The Reform Movement and Gun Violence Prevention

The Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) has long recognized the need for legislation “that would limit and control the sale and use of firearms” and has called on the United States government to “eliminate the manufacture, importation, advertising, sale, transfer and possession of handguns except for limited instances” (URJ 1975). Over the years, the URJ has spoken out on gun violence prevention with particular passion, insisting that gun regulation is “a vital necessity.”

The Reform Movement makes gun violence prevention a top priority. In 1999, URJ President Rabbi Eric Yoffie made it the primary social action topic of his Biennial sermon and called for a nationwide campaign to end gun violence. The Biennial passed a resolution urging congregations to initiate projects and speak out publicly on the issue that we continue to abide by in our legislative advocacy.

The North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) has also taken an active stance with gun violence prevention and passed a strongly worded resolution calling for stricter gun laws.

***Gun Worship Is Blasphemy*²**

Above all, let us remember this: sensible gun control is a religious issue. The indiscriminate distribution of guns is an offense against God and humanity.

Controlling guns is not only a political matter; it is a solemn religious obligation. Our gun-flooded society has turned weapons into idols, and the worship of idols must be recognized for what it is: blasphemy. And the only appropriate religious response to blasphemy is sustained moral outrage and focused moral action.

There is not a single word in the sacred Scriptures of the Christian, Jewish or Islamic traditions that either opposes commonsensical gun control or supports the idea of some God-given right to automatic weapons that fire 100 shots in a single minute.

Yes, our Constitution gives us certain guarantees when it comes to gun ownership. But there is nothing in the Constitution that says we are entitled to own weapons with a magazine of more than eight to 10 bullets. There is nothing that obligates us to go along with what the NRA has long advocated: the right of almost any terrorist suspect, deranged person, wife-beater and crook to buy almost any weapon at almost any time, no questions asked.

When these terrible tragedies occur, our nation looks to its religious leaders and its places of worship to provide comfort to the victims and solace to a stricken nation. And it is important that we should do so; we have the capacity to mobilize communities of the

² Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, “Gun Worship Is Blasphemy,” Feb. 17, 2013, www.huffpost.com/entry/gun-worship-is-blasphemy_b_2307821. As noted in the sidebar on page 1 of this toolkit, GVP advocates no longer use the term “gun control” because of its misuse in fearmongering campaigns by the NRA and other gun rights groups.

faithful, to provide love and caring to those in distress, and to hold our fellow Americans together when anguish and fear are driving us apart.

But at this moment, more is needed of the religious community. As men and women of God, we need to take the moral offensive and demand that something be done. My plea to every pastor, priest, rabbi and imam in America: This is not the time for the usual platitudes. And yes, we need programs for troubled teens and fewer bloodthirsty movies and hideous video games. But we also need to take on the gun nuts, a single-issue minority too often motivated by intolerance and filled with hate.

When it comes to guns, Americans have learned to be cynical. They have learned that no matter how great the outrage, the entrenched gun interests are always triumphant. But as religious leaders, we know what this leads to. We know that when good people back down again and again; when the gun worshipers are rewarded with ever-more radical pro-gun legislation; when the corpses of the dead, lying bloody before us, are ignored; and when the zealotry and folly of the pro-gun lobby are not confronted by the forces of sanity, the result is fatalism and despair, undermining faith in government and faith in God.

I understand that gun control is not a simple matter; that compromise will be necessary; and that honest, well-intentioned people will differ on exactly what measures are required. But we must make a start. Surely this is the moment to create a coalition of sensible citizens, willing to come forward and say no to the deadly toll that guns are taking on the lives of our children. Surely this is the time to reach out to politicians, of all persuasions and all parties, and ask them to put the welfare of our children and the safety of our citizens ahead of petty, partisan concerns. And surely religious leaders and institutions—obligated to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with their God—should lead the way. . . .

Reconstructionist Judaism³

Jewish foundational texts, from Torah and Talmud to medieval codes and modern ethics, are pro-regulation, across the board. Where ownership of weapons is addressed in our classical sources, it tends to be allowed only within strict limits. Individual freedom is indeed a Jewish value, but generally subservient to the collective good—and certainly the “right” to own deadly weapons remains secondary to such core values as *Sakanat HaNefesh* (preserving life) and *Redifat Shalom* (pursuing peace).

Judaism’s pro-regulation view comports well with the best of American thought. Steps like universal background checks, waiting periods, criminalizing gun trafficking, and banning high-capacity clips are supported not just by most Americans, but even by most gun owners.

Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, bade us to consciously “live in two civilizations,” so that the best of one profoundly informs the other. Both American and Jewish thought cherish freedom, always yoked with responsibility. Judaism comes down heavily against idolatry, which is more nuanced than simply worshipping false gods—idolatry is the

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overwhelming focus on one thing as if it were salvific and holy. The worst of American thought truly idolizes guns. In prioritizing the freedom of one person (usually White) to shoot above the freedom of others (disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) to live, this approach fails the test.

It is up to us to bring Judaism's prophetic, justice-seeking, lifesaving, pro-reasonable-regulation perspective proudly to bear in the public square. Our thoughtful Jewish input will respect the Constitutional right to bear arms, where good cause exists. But in keeping with Judaism's focus on the public good, and on shalom, and on life, it will insist that such rights remain "well-regulated." Fear of Heaven (*Yirat Shamayim*) is something our tradition asks us to cultivate—but we shouldn't have to live in fear of preventable gun violence.

Conservative Judaism

In Judaism, "shalom", or peace, is the ideal. Most of Judaism's major prayers invoke the desire for peace.⁴ What, then, are we told that is relevant to the ownership and use of guns?

The Talmud includes various regulations that apply to the ownership of guns. There is a law against owning a dangerous dog (Bava Kamma 79a): one who owns a dangerous dog must keep it tied in metal chains at all times (Choshen Mishpat 409:3). Regardless of safety precautions taken, the dog must be chained because, even if proper safeguards are in place, it may frighten strangers, and may result in injuries both physical and stress-related (Shabbat 63b).⁵ Likewise, the Torah requires that a roof be properly gated, in order to prevent people from falling off of it (Deuteronomy 22:8). This commandment is understood by the Talmud as a general directive to remove any safety hazard (Bava Kamma 15b; Choshen Mishpat 427:8).⁶

According to classical Jewish law, there are a number of animals that are considered too dangerous to keep (Mishnah Bava Kamma 1:4). Such animals are said to fall in the legal category called *mu'ad*, as they are dangerous by nature. If they attack someone, their owner can't claim that it was an accident; the owner is liable because he shouldn't have owned something that is inherently dangerous.⁷ From this it can be inferred that, should an innocent be harmed by a gun, the owner is at fault, regardless of any safeguards taken.

With regard to keeping children safe, Leviticus 19:14 prohibits putting "a stumbling block in front of the blind." Since guns might be found by children who don't understand their power, guns can be seen as a dangerous stumbling block. Jewish law teaches that "it is a positive commandment to remove and be vigilant about any stumbling block where there is a danger to someone's life . . . and if you do not remove it or leave the stumbling block and it brings about

⁴ Rabbi Mark Dratch, "What Do Contemporary Rabbis Say about Self Defense and Gun Control in the Present?" Jewish Values Online, 2012, www.jewishvaluesonline.org/question.php?id=118.

⁵ Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz, "Gun Control: A Jewish Look," Jewish Law Commentary, 2008, www.jlaw.com/Commentary/guncontrol.html.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Marc Katz, "The Jewish View on Weapons," *Tablet*, Dec. 19, 2012, www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/119539/what-judaism-says-about-weapons.

danger you have failed in your mission to fulfill the commandment and [you] may have been responsible for spilling another's blood" (Choshen Mishpat 427:8).

What does Jewish law say about using guns for hunting? Many authorities prohibit hunting for sport (Orach Chaim, Rama 316:2, Darchei Teshuva YD 117:44).⁸ Jewish law prohibits causing any unnecessary pain to animals. Deuteronomy 22:4 says, "You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen [under its load] on the road, and ignore them." Further, Judaism teaches that everything in this world has a spark of Divine purpose, and to kill an animal for sport is to extinguish that spark.⁹ It is worth noting that the first two villains introduced in the Torah are Nimrod and Esau, who are the only biblical characters identified as hunters.¹⁰

Eating animals killed by hunting is prohibited by the laws of kosher. These laws require that an animal be slaughtered in a specific, ethical manner. Shehitah, or the laws of slaughter, entail severing the trachea and the esophagus in accordance with the oral tradition; if these rules are not met, the animal is unfit to be eaten. An animal or fowl that is improperly slaughtered (or is not slaughtered but dies of itself) is considered carrion (*nevelah*) and unfit for food.¹¹

Looking more broadly, we see the concept of *Tikkun Olam*, or "repairing the world," discussed throughout Judaism. *Tikkun Olam* is "a Jewish concept defined by acts of kindness performed to perfect or repair the world. The phrase is found in the Mishnah, a body of classical rabbinic teachings. It is often used when discussing issues of social policy, ensuring a safeguard to those who may be at a disadvantage. In modern Jewish circles, *tikkun olam* has become synonymous with the notion of social action and the pursuit of social justice."¹²

Surely, preventing the deaths of innocent people from gun violence must be considered a mitzvah and part of *Tikkun Olam*, as it clearly is related to social policy and "ensuring a safeguard to those who may be at a disadvantage." Safety from gun violence must be considered a matter of social justice as well. And honoring God and performing mitzvot does not get any more basic, important, or sacred than honoring and preserving the lives of His children.

Orthodox Judaism

Rabbinical Council of America Resolution¹³

In response to the terrible proliferation of fatal shootings in the United States that result in part from Americans' easy access to lethal weapons, a brief yet comprehensive 2014

⁸ Steinmetz, "Gun Control: A Jewish Look" (see note 5).

⁹ Baruch S. Davidson, "The Jewish view on hunting for sport," Chabad.org, undated, www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1589324/jewish/The-Jewish-View-on-Hunting-for-Sport.htm.

¹⁰ Rabbi Dr. Asher Meir, "The Jewish Ethicist: Judaism and hunting," *Aish*, Feb. 13, 2011, www.aish.com/ci/be/The_Jewish_Ethicist_Judaism_and_Hunting.html.

¹¹ Rabbi Gerson Appel, "Kosher Slaughter: An Introduction," My Jewish Learning Center, 2012, www.myjewishlearning.com/article/kosher-slaughtering-an-introduction/2/.

¹² "Tikkun Olam," Learning to Give, undated, www.learningtogive.org/resources/tikkun-olam.

¹³ The Rabbinical Council of America is the national policy body of Orthodox Judaism in America.

resolution of the 1000+ members of Rabbinical Council of America addresses gun usage and ownership in the United States from personal, legal, cultural, and religious perspectives. Asserting the Torah's perspective that war, weaponry, and violence are "necessary evils in our unredeemed world" as well as the Torah's view that, contrary to some strains of American culture, such matters must be approached with appropriate gravitas even when warranted, the RCA favors restricting Americans' easy access to weapons and ammunition and encourages all to desist from recreational activities that desensitize participants to killing, weaponry, and violence.

Formally adopted by a direct vote of the RCA membership, the full text of "2014 Resolution: Gun Violence in America" states:

WHEREAS War, killing, physical violence, and weaponry are necessary evils in our unredeemed world; and,

WHEREAS Engagement with these matters ought at all times to be conducted with gravitas commensurate with their destructive nature; and,

WHEREAS Jewish law adopts the opinion of the Sages (Mishna Shabbat 6:4) that weapons ought never be glorified or viewed as adornments even when their possession is justified, in contradistinction to certain strains of American culture; and,

WHEREAS The Rabbinical Council of America has noted with anguish and alarm some of the recent shooting deaths in schools and elsewhere in the United States; and,

WHEREAS The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America expressed support for federal legislation to prevent gun violence in 2013 and as early as 1968

Therefore, the Rabbinical Council of America

Condone, when permitted by local ordinance, private American citizens owning or learning how to use weapons or to engage in violent acts for justified purposes such as self-defense, when undertaken with appropriate gravitas; and

Favors restricting American citizens' easy and unregulated access to weapons and ammunition; and

Urges all to desist from and discourage recreational activities that desensitize participants to, make light of, or glorify war, killing, physical violence, and weapons; and

Anxiously seeks the fulfillment of the prophetic vision, "They will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4).¹⁴

¹⁴ Eugene Volokh, "Orthodox Rabbis on Guns," Sept. 16, 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2014/09/16/orthodox-rabbis-on-guns.

Modern Orthodox Perspective¹⁵

In principle, Jews should be for the right to bear arms. The tradition teaches that self-defense is a right—in fact, a mitzvah. In practice, Jews should restrict—ideally, prohibit—carrying guns because this is a life-threatening practice. (Such a sharp distinction between principle and practice is a very Talmudic approach.)

Judaism's highest value is life. To save a life, it is a mitzvah to override 610 of the 613 commandments in the Torah. It is prohibited to keep a dangerous animal or pet in the house because it may harm or kill someone. If there is a place at the home where people are at risk of death by falling, the law of Maakeh requires building a parapet or protective enclosure to guard life. Conclusion: bearing arms, i.e., keeping guns in the house, should be outlawed.

To be fair, many people keep guns because they hunt. In the old days, when hunting was a source of food, one could defend the practice. Even then, most Jews looked down on hunting as incompatible with Jewish values. Today, when hunting is mostly a recreational sport, it surely violates the laws of reverence for life and *tzaar baalei chayim*—not to cause pain to other living creatures.

True, the right to bear arms is established and protected by the Second Amendment. However, this right was set up in reaction to the behavior of the English monarchy, which oppressed Americans, extorted their taxes, imposed soldiers on the local population and tried to crush their move for independence. Today, democracy is so entrenched that there is no chance the government would act despotically in these ways. The police and the army protect people and work for them. Under these circumstances, the right to bear arms should have been repealed long ago. The entrenched insistence on gun possession is overlaid with elements of paranoia and conspiracy thinking, which represent danger to a civil peaceful society. And in general, Jews do not do well in societies marked by conspiracy theories and paranoia.

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Photo: Hebrew text, ram's horn (shofar), and Star of David, public domain (CC0).

¹⁵ Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, "Ask the Rabbis: Gun Control: Should Jews Be for or against the Right to Bear Arms?" Moment, July-Aug. 2013, momentmag.com/ask-the-rabbis-gun-control/.



Chapter 2. Mainline Protestant Perspectives on Gun Violence

Through official statements and resolutions, several mainline Protestant denominations have addressed the issue of gun violence, encouraging their congregations to study and pray about the problem and to advocate for public policies to reduce gun violence. This chapter presents excerpts from eight such documents—seven denominational and one inter-denominational—that highlight the faith perspectives grounding their policy concerns. The full documents should be consulted to obtain a complete appreciation for the denominations’ faith perspectives.

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

[T]he Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada seeks to follow Jesus’ way of peace making and has committed to become a Pro-Reconciling/Anti-Racist Church . . .

[S]cripture tells us God is our refuge and strength (Psalm 46:1), Jesus commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44), and the Church is called to be one body, making no distinction (Galatians 3:28) . . .¹

Episcopal Church, Bishops United Against Gun Violence

We believe in a God of life in the face of death who calls our church to speak and act decisively against the unholy trinity of poverty, racism and violence. In the struggle against these evils, our group offers four contributions.

- Public liturgy including processions, vigils and prayer services to commemorate the dead and inspire the living.

¹ “Revised GA-1521 Substitute Resolution from the General Board on Gun Violence,” July 2015, <https://ga.disciples.org/resolutions/2015/revised-ga-1521-substitute-resolution-from-the-general-board-on-gun-violence>. The resolution contains several additional clauses, but the two quoted above provide the resolution’s faith perspective. See also “Gun Violence,” Disciples Home Missions, <https://www.discipleshomemissions.org/missions-advocacy/gun-violence>.

- Spiritual support for those living with gun shot wounds, with grief, with fear and with the temptation of hopelessness, and advocacy for broader and easier access to mental health services for those at risk of suicide.
- Sound teaching for those yearning to bring an ethic of Christian compassion and concern for the common good to bear on debates regarding unjust economic and legal structures, public safety, individual rights and our responsibilities to one another as children of God.
- Persistent advocacy for common sense gun safety measures that enjoy the support of gun owners and non-gun owners alike²

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The biblical narrative reveals God’s resolve for peace.

God created all things and gives unity, order, and purpose to a world of different creatures. All humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), made for life in community—with God, with others, and with the rest of creation.

All humans also are bound together in sin. Sin, the rupture in our relation with God, profoundly disrupts creation. Centeredness in self, rather than in God, destroys the bonds of human community. In bondage to sin, we fall captive to fear. Sin entangles our social structures. The Bible describes the power of sin: ingratitude, deceit, distrust, hatred, greed, envy, arrogance, sloth, corruption, debauchery, aggression, cruelty, oppression, and injustice. These violate community and generate killing and war.

God nonetheless preserves the world, limiting the effects of sin, bringing good even out of evil and making earthly peace possible. Through the Law, the sovereign God of the nations holds all responsible for their neighbor, protects community, and blesses creation ever anew. God works often in hidden and inscrutable ways. God’s judgment comes upon a sinful humanity for failure to live together justly and peacefully, and calls all to repentance and faith in God. God’s just wrath against all that causes chaos and destruction is in the service of the divine resolve for peace.

God’s resolve for peace was manifested in a new way through one people, chosen to be a blessing to all. Through the people of Israel, God acted so as to reconcile creation, promising a reign in which peace and justice will kiss each other (Psalm 85).

God’s promise is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Rejected by humans, Jesus was confirmed by God who raised him from the dead in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that “on earth” there might be “peace” (Luke 2:14). In bringing this peace,

² <https://bishopsagainstgunviolence.org/about-us>. See also “Resources to Respond to Gun Violence,” The Episcopal Church, Office of Government Relations, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ogr/resources-to-respond-to-gun-violence>. The church does not appear to have a statement, resolution, or other document providing a theological basis for its work on gun violence prevention.

- Jesus taught love for one's enemies;
- he reached out to the oppressed, downtrodden, and rejected of the earth;
- he prayed for his enemies while himself being rejected on the cross;
- above all, through Jesus' violent death, God redeemed the world, "for . . . while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10).

This reconciling love of enemy discloses how deeply peace is rooted in who God is. The cross of Christ enacts God's resolve for peace once-for-all. "The God of peace" suffers with and for a suffering and sinful world so that all of creation will enjoy the loving community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

"The Gospel of peace" (Ephesians 6:15) heals our broken relationship with God, removing the ultimate root of violence and injustice. The Gospel breaks down the dividing walls of hostility among people, creates a new humanity—making Christ Jesus "our peace" (Ephesians 2:13- 22)—and promises the reconciliation of all things in Christ. The peace of the Gospel is the final peace God intends for all. The baptized community already takes part in this peace through the Word and faith as it hopes for creation's fulfillment in "a new heaven and a new earth" where death and pain "will be no more" (Revelation 21:1, 4).

God's steadfast resolve for peace encompasses our time as it does all times. In creation and redemption, through Law and Gospel, God's faithful love acts for peace.³

National Council of Churches

When thinking about the problem of violence, Christian faith is both "idealistic" and "realistic." On the one hand, there is a stream within the Christian tradition that counsels non-violence in all circumstances. A seminal text is the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew's gospel, where Jesus instructs his followers to bear violence rather than inflict it.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5: 38-39, 43-44).

It is difficult to imagine that the One whose own Passion models the redemptive power of non-violence would look favorably on the violence of contemporary U.S. society. Present-day violence is made far worse than it otherwise would be by the prevalence of weapons on our streets. This stream of the Christian tradition insists that it is idolatry to trust in guns to make us secure, since that usually leads to mutual escalation while distracting us from the One whose love alone gives us security.

³ "For Peace in God's World," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Social Statement, Aug. 20, 1995, pp. 2-3, <https://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements/Peace>. This statement deals primarily with international peace but is also cited in support of ELCA's gun violence prevention work, e.g., ENGAGE: Lutherans for Gun Violence Prevention, <http://www.engageelca.org/about-us>.

On the other hand, Christians also know, from both experience and scripture, that all humans are sinful, capable of acting with hostile aggression toward their neighbors. This “realistic” view of human nature also argues for restricting access to guns which, in the wrong hands or without adequate supervision, can make violence ever more deadly. Christians can certainly contend that it is necessary for public authorities to take up arms in order to protect citizens from violence; but to allow assault weapons in the hands of the general public can scarcely be justified on Christian grounds. The stark reality is that such weapons end up taking more lives than they defend, and the reckless sale or use of these weapons refutes the gospel's prohibition against violence.⁴

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

In the 1990 Resolution on Gun Violence, the 202nd General Assembly (1990) refers to the “peaceable kingdom—a society where God’s justice reigns, where reconciliation replaces anger, where an open hand and a turned cheek replace retaliation, where love of enemies is as important as love of neighbor.” . . . The people of God must continue to hold sacred the visions recorded in Scripture of the Creator’s intentions for humankind. Such visions provide the basis of critique, so that we can see how far, in fact, we have strayed from God’s will for us. Visions also compel us to action, giving us moral clarity and courage. . . .

[Isaiah 65:18-20 gives] a radically different vision of human community, where parents do not have to worry about letting their children play in the neighborhood and adults do not have to fear walking down the street at night. Remembering this vision stirs our longing for a different society, built on solidarity and trust, and not on terror. . . .

We creatures of the Living God have organized government structures that enable us to provide protection for all members of society. Our governments, then, most closely reflect the image and intentions of the Creator when they “defend the lives of all our neighbors,” build community or “tranquility,” and protect our citizens from harm. When we, instead, allow individuals to arm themselves without regulation at the price of the safety of innocent victims, the good of the whole is threatened. . . .⁵

Jesus went further in naming the idols that become the foundation of an unredeemed society. He reprimanded Peter for first grabbing a weapon in his defense. “For all who live by the sword will die by the sword” as in proverb form (Matt. 26:52b). If weapons become the basis of your social relations, they will kill you. If preserving your guns has become more important than the safety of thousands of other people, then weapons have become your idol, in diametric opposition to the vision of a city that is a joy, where children and old people live out their years, and the weeping of grief-stricken mothers is no longer heard.

⁴ “Ending Gun Violence: A Resolution and Call to Action by the National Council of Churches of Christ, U.S.A.,” May 17, 2010, reaffirmed 2018, <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/ncc-reaffirms-its-2010-resolution-on-gun-violence>.

⁵ “Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call,” Presbyterian Mission Agency, 2010, pp. 8-9, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/1-gun-violence-policy-2010.pdf>. Phrases quoted are from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Chapter VIII, Number 39.

It is not enough to have a social critique, however. The first letter of John challenges us “not (to) love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.” We must struggle with how to implement the vision, a challenge that was taken up by John Calvin as well. At the very core of his theology was an understanding that the intentions of God should be implemented on earth.

Let us be clear: this is not a call to arms but to community. There is a direct connection, as we have seen, between God’s intentions, the prophets’ visions, Jesus’ teaching, and the implications for our own actions. If God commands that we not kill and that we work for a future when former enemies work together as friends, then the injunction extends beyond our own individual choices, as important as they are. We are compelled to work for policies, or ways of ordering society, which “defend,” “promote tranquility,” “ward off harm,” and remove harm. How we love the stranger is not through our good feelings or individual acts of charity but through advocating for policies that will extend protection to the greatest number of people.⁶

Southern Baptist Convention

[T]he Bible affirms that God is the author of human life and that human life is sacred and worthy of protection (Genesis 9:5–6; Psalm 139:13–16) . . .

[T]he shedding of innocent blood is a repugnant and wicked evil that transgresses the moral law of God and does violence to the image of God in every person (Genesis 1:26–27; Exodus 20:13) . . .

[G]un violence perpetrated against innocent persons is incompatible with the character of Jesus Christ. . . .⁷

United Church of Christ

Violence is an exertion of force so as to injure or abuse. Violence encompasses violations of trust and infringements upon the integrity, wholeness, or health of another or of oneself. To indulge in violence is to deny the full humanity of the person violated and to treat that person as an object to be used and/or discarded.

Ultimately violence breaks faith with the belief that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God [Genesis 1: 26-27] and thus worthy of respect. . . .

[O]ur Christian convictions call us to be peacemakers in a world in need of peace . . .

⁶ Ibid, 17. See also “Gun Violence,” Presbyterian Mission Agency, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/gun-violence>; “Gun Violence and GA225,” Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), June 1, 2022, <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2022/6/1/gun-violence-and-ga225>.

⁷ “On Gun Violence And Mass Shootings,” Southern Baptist Convention 2018 Annual Meeting, June 1, 2018, <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-gun-violence-and-mass-shootings>. The resolution contains several additional clauses, but the three quoted above provide the resolution’s faith perspective.

[T]he acceptance of violence as a "norm" in our society is a violation of the most fundamental of all our Christian beliefs⁸

[O]ur fascination with hand guns, assault rifles, and other weapons designed to take human life reflects a deeper spiritual sickness in our cultural character, a sickness born of fear, mistrust, and the desire to dominate another . . .

[G]un idolatry is part of a culture of death, nurtured by the National Rifle Association (NRA), TV ratings, and an international arms industry . . .

Jesus once lamented over his own city, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . , would that you knew the things that make for peace" . . .

Jesus, in whom we have come to know the gentle love of God, was himself the victim of a violent death and so turned us forever against the forces of violence that tempt us to seek annihilation of the enemy . . .

[I]n proclaiming the resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ, we confess that God's saving love alone has the power to undo the forces of violence and death and heal our cultural wounds . . .

[T]he time has come for religious leaders to call for repentance for the sin of violence and our idolatrous fascination with weapons, and to resolve to work with God's life-giving Spirit to restore hope to the victims of violence and our communities⁹

United Methodist Church

The prophet Micah casts a hopeful vision of the future where nations will "beat their swords into iron plows, and their spears into pruning hooks" (Micah 4:3). Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

Gun violence greatly affects individuals, families and communities. We believe "As followers of Jesus, called to live into the reality of God's dream of shalom as described by Micah, we must address the epidemic of gun violence so 'that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in God's paths.'"

The United Methodist Church calls congregations to address gun violence locally through prayer, conversation, support for those affected by gun violence, practicing and teaching

⁸ "Violence in Our Society and World," General Synod 20 Resolutions, United Church of Christ, June/July 1995, <http://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/GS-20-Violence-in-our-society.pdf>. The resolution contains several additional clauses, but the two quoted above provide the resolution's faith perspective.

⁹ "Guns and Violence," General Synod 20 Resolutions, United Church of Christ, June/July 1995, <http://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/GS-20-Guns-and-violence.pdf>. The resolution contains several additional clauses, but the six quoted above provide the resolution's faith perspective. See also "Gun Violence Prevention," United Church of Christ, <https://www.ucc.org/understanding-the-issues/gun-violence-prevention>.

gun safety and partnering with law enforcement to help prevent gun violence. The church also urges congregations to advocate for laws that prevent or reduce gun violence¹⁰

Julianna Bachmann, Interfaith Coordinator, Burke-Fairfax Moms Demand Action
Robert More, Pax Christi - St. John Neumann Church, Reston, VA

Photo: Fayetteville First Baptist Church, Fayetteville, Georgia, Feb. 25, 2017, public domain (CC0).

¹⁰ “What Does the UMC Say about Preventing Gun Violence?” Ask The UMC, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-is-the-united-methodist-position-on-preventing-gun-violence>. For a fuller statement, see “Our Call to End Gun Violence,” The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2016, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/book-of-resolutions-our-call-to-end-gun-violence>, and the August 2022 statement by Council of Bishops United Methodist Church, citing Exodus 20:13, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/bishops-call-for-rejecting-idolatry-of-guns>.



Chapter 3. Gun Violence Prevention and Evangelicals¹

American evangelicals constitute a subgroup of the U.S. population that is most likely to have access to guns and defend unfettered rights to ownership and use of firearms. This is probably due to one or more of three principal factors: (1) evangelicals are concentrated in areas where hunting is widespread, and distances between homes and police installations are significant; (2) evangelicals adhere to a highly independent ethos, religiously, culturally, and politically, which includes a sense of personal responsibility for one's safety, and (3) historically, evangelicals have feared government persecution.

Any attempt to enlist evangelicals in the effort to reduce gun violence must take into consideration the above factors. I'll discuss each one more fully, but first, I'll examine another complicating element. The central organizing tenet of evangelical faith is the Bible. It is considered the full, final, and inerrant source for all matters pertaining to Christian faith and practice. Therefore, successfully recruiting evangelicals to any cause must begin with scriptural validation. The adage "Chapter and Verse" applies here.

Evangelicals are so oriented to biblical warrant that data, statistics, even detailed accounts around the subject do not carry decisive weight unless backed up by Bible texts. However, it is not hard to find the requisite biblical warrant for reducing gun violence.

Scripture instructs believers, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). Many Bible passages speak to other aspects of relating to one another, including those we perceive to be or intend to be our enemies. The following are examples:

¹ The Interfaith Network is grateful to Rev. Rob Schenck, President, The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Institute, for this essay. Rev. Schenck is also the Administrative Bishop of the Methodist Evangelical Church USA and an executive advisor to the Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance.

“But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” (Jesus, in Luke 6:27-28)

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (The Apostle Paul, in Romans 12:20-21)

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” (The Apostle Paul, in Romans 12:19)

Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” (Matthew 26:52)

It’s an accepted fact that none of the behaviors named in these verses are easy or natural for anyone, including followers of Christ. Nevertheless, patterning oneself after Jesus and the teachings of Scripture requires discipline, thus the term “disciple.” A well-respected and universal evangelical source for theological terms, the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter Elwell, defines “disciple” in this way:

The characteristic name for those who gathered around Jesus during his ministry was “disciple.” He was the teacher or master; they were his disciples (Greek, *mathetai*), a term involving too much personal attachment and commitment to be rendered adequately by pupil. The name was carried over into Acts, where it frequently has the general sense of Christian (see Acts 14:21). The use of the term in Acts for those who had no acquaintance with Jesus during the days of his flesh serves as a reminder that the relationship of subsequent generations of Christians to the exalted Christ is not essentially different from that enjoyed by those who walked with him on earth. (Elwell, 1984)

In addition to what Elwell says about this critical moniker is the patterning of the disciple after the master. In other words, the disciple more or less mimics the master-teacher. When Jesus called his first cohort of disciples, he did so with the mandate, “Come, follow me” (Matthew 4:19). The sense here is to take as a model or precedent, to imitate. As Jesus-centered people, Christians emulate their Lord; they seek to reflect his mission, model, and methods in their thoughts, words, and actions.

The written record of Jesus’ life and ministry never portrays him as violent or defensive. Likewise, his followers did not physically attack or defend themselves when attacked. During the one instance when the disciple Peter lunged out at those attempting to arrest Christ, Jesus harshly rebuked his pugnacious follower, miraculously healed the injured victim, and denounced anyone who would employ violence (John 18:11; Luke 22:51; Matthew 26:52).

Such demands are taxing to Christians, and even Jesus’ retinue became tired of the expectations. For this reason, the New Testament admonishes readers not to “become weary with well doing” (Galatians 6:9). It’s easy for Bible Believers to get worn out and give up on pursuing the virtues required of them. That’s when many will revert to the more accessible paths of resentment, revenge, and retribution. Guns sometimes factor into this demoralization

process. It's much easier to wield a weapon than it is to trust God against fear, appeal to a would-be assailant, or engage in nonviolent defense.

The evangelical embrace of gun culture isn't always nefarious, though. There is an idea that protecting oneself and one's family and friends is noble, reasonable, and required of Christians. For example, one Bible verse says, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8).

This text is often associated with arming oneself to "provide" safety to one's family, thus, doing what's right by them. Similarly, when Jesus' disciples showed him their "two swords" in a gospel account (Luke 22:36-38), he appeared to approve of their equipping themselves for personal protection—although a convincing case can be made that Jesus was speaking figuratively here, as verse 51 seems to make clear. Regardless of whether one interprets Jesus' reference to the sword as literal or metaphorical, when sometimes-ardent patriotism links with these novel interpretations, the result can be an exaggerated defense of so-called "Second Amendment Rights." Therefore, I've warned fellow evangelicals to be careful because in respecting the Second Amendment, it is possible to violate the Second Commandment. (See Deuteronomy 5:6-7 and Exodus 20: 2-3.²)

Before I look at the counterpoints to pro-gun rights positions, I want to return to the three factors in evangelical reluctance to support gun violence prevention.

The first point I made was about geographic location. Evangelical populations are most significant in the southern, central, and western parts of the country. These are places where gun use is prevalent for hunting, sport, and safety. The idea of limiting gun rights is associated with taking away somebody's food, recreation, or, worse, leaving them to be sitting ducks for anyone intent on harming them. The wrong question to ask of a person motivated by self-preservation is, "Why wouldn't you support gun control?" What they hear is, "Why wouldn't you starve, afflict, and kill yourself?" Instead, it's best to ask the evangelical gun enthusiast, "What are you trusting for provision? Is it God or your gun? Is the pleasure of shooting worth the risks it poses? Where does Jesus model lethal force for us to imitate? How can we love our enemies when we're pointing a deadly weapon at them? Where does the Bible say we can kill?"

Gun use must be cast as more than simply a public safety or personal rights question for evangelicals. Instead, it must be examined as a supremely moral issue, a question of right and wrong and life and death, both of which implicate Jesus' two Great Commandments, love of God and neighbor (see Mark 12:28-34), as well as one of the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:13). These qualities are enough for Christians and churches to give the subject serious, prayerful, and studious attention.

On the last point about government persecution, many Christians think they must maintain a capacity to fend off armed federal agents in case of a crackdown on religious liberty. They

² "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (NRSV).

believe they must “obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29), which means the federal government will inevitably harass, arrest, jail, and even execute them. They think they can hold this ugly eventuality in check if they can meet “the feds” bullet for bullet. Countering this notion will require being, as Jesus said, “shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16 NIV). Politically conservative evangelicals revere the founding documents of the United States, particularly the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Using these instruments to point out that the fundamental, underlying principle of the U.S. government is one of “self-government,” generated by “the people” and conducted by duly elected representatives chosen by “the people,” can alleviate this fear.

It can also help to add to the above that law enforcement officers, military personnel, and other legally armed agents are duly deputized “by the people” to bear arms in our stead and thereby reduce the risks that come with an unregulated armed citizenry.

Finally, reminding Christians that they are also, most importantly, citizens of another higher homeland can ease anxieties they harbor about America: “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20).

Pastors remain one of the most significant influences for evangelicals. Asking these questions and making these points from the pulpit in a Bible-based sermon is a very compelling way to introduce the need and means for reducing gun violence. Sunday school, home fellowships, and youth groups are other fruitful places. The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Institute publishes a Bible study examining gun ownership and its spiritual, moral, and legal dimensions. Individuals, groups, and whole congregations can use it. You’ll find it here: <https://tdbi.org/gun-violence-prevention/faith-over-fear>.

An excellent resource for pastors, denominational leaders, Sunday school teachers, and other ministry personnel is *God and Guns in America* by TDBI Senior Fellow Michael Austin. Obtain it here: <https://www.eerdmans.com/Products/7643/god-and-guns-in-america.aspx>.

Other effective resources for evangelicals include these documentary films: *The Armor of Light*³ and *Beating Swords into Plowshares to End Gun Violence*.⁴

Photo: Valley Evangelical Free Church, Kemmerer, Wyoming, by Jimmy Emerson, July 8, 2016, licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/).

³ <https://www.armoroflightfilm.com>.

⁴ <https://binged.it/3FhifM5>.



Chapter 4. Gun Violence and the Black Church¹

The issue of gun violence affects all Americans. School shootings and other random acts of mass violence have targeted all ages, races, and ethnicities, striking fear into the hearts of Americans and shattering the lives of thousands who thought they were safe.

Yet the Black community has experienced gun violence in ways that other American subcultures have not. Guns were used to bring Africans to this country in chains, and to keep them in forced servitude. Families were ripped apart as children were sold away from their mothers and fathers at the point of a gun. After the Civil War and Emancipation, Black Americans lived in fear of vigilantes who enforced their own views of segregation with guns and whips. During and after the Great Migration, governmental neglect—or worse—left Blacks vulnerable to criminal violence.

While it is tempting to look at this long history as ancient history, the effects of these traumas endure and repeat today. Harsh enforcement of petty violations has fueled a mistrust of police that endures in Black communities. The failure of authorities to solve murders of Blacks is a driving force for cycles of violence that endure and echo through our cities and neighborhoods and even through our generations. The murder of Ahmaud Arbery in 2020 shows that White people with guns still feel like they have control over Black bodies. The murder of Philando

¹ The Interfaith Network is grateful to Rev. Sharon Risher, Associate Minister, New Emmanuel United Church of Christ in Charlotte, NC, for this essay. Rev. Risher's mother and cousins were among those killed by a White supremacist at Emanuel AME Church in 2015. Rev. Risher, who has also served as a chaplain, now volunteers with several gun safety organizations and is the author of *For Such a Time as This: Hope and Forgiveness After the Charleston Massacre* (2019). She also does work against the death penalty.

Castile in 2016 shows that authorities still don't trust Black people with guns, even if they are carrying them lawfully.

Throughout this bloody history and down to the present, the Black Church has been there. Faithful Black women and men have served across denominational and confessional lines to serve their communities, bringing the good news to the poor and oppressed and preaching, as the Lord says through Isaiah, "Peace, peace, to those far and near," and "creating praise on the lips of the mourners" (Isaiah 57).

The Black Church has been and is struggling to find the connection between our communities' and our congregations' experience of gun violence. Too often our neighborhoods are the ones where the violence is felt most acutely. When the violence comes from criminals, we feel it. When it comes from the misuse of governmental authority, we bear it. Our congregations and ministers are the ones burying and mourning the dead, praying for and working to heal the wounded, making those who have been stolen from whole again, and consoling those who are affected in any way. And too often, we do it without the support that we need from the government.

And, tragically, we are targeted. The violence that has marked our history in this country continues. In 2015, at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, a White supremacist sat in a Bible study and prayer time, then killed nine people who were worshiping that day. My mother and cousins were among those killed. They and the other victims were targeted for their skin color, having done no wrong to the killer and despite having been a blessing to their community.

And so what is there to do? Many Black churches are starting to be engaged in various aspects of peacebuilding in their cities. They are working to bring that biblical, prophetic vision of *shalom*—not merely an absence of violence but the presence of flourishing and abundance. Like Nehemiah's builders (Nehemiah 3), they work in multiple directions at once. Black ministers and congregants are preaching the Gospel while mediating tough, multidimensional conflicts. While working to create economic conditions for true development. While liaising between their congregations, communities, and authorities.

The roles of faith and forgiveness in this work are complicated and are ongoing works of transformation. Forgiveness is key—but, like Peter, Black Americans are tested in asking, "How many times must I forgive my brother?" (Matthew 18:21). Forgiveness, grace, and peace are hallmarks of the Black Church—but it is easy to say that from a distance, and less easy to do so when you are the one affected.

I myself have wrestled with this issue repeatedly since the murder of my mother and cousins. The Black community is constantly being asked to forgive. Forgiveness is a long process of emotional and spiritual transformation, and it comes with great cost. It is not merely an act of reading the Scripture and agreeing with it that provides forgiveness. Those of us in the Black Church who have been victims and survivors must wrestle with the real wrongs that have been done to us. God has been gracious to our faith community and blessed us with a forgiving spirit, yet it is an ongoing struggle that individual believers and the Black Church must wrestle with.

The balance of working to bring the justice, individual and systemic, that the Lord promises is held in tension with allowing our hearts to be transformed into the gracious, forgiving, and peaceful image of God.

What we *can* say is that the Lord promises good for those who love him. I say, with great sorrow, that my community, the Black Church, may be the faith community most affected by gun violence in America. It is difficult to see the stories of crime, of accidents, of abuse, of oppression, and not give in to despair. The Biblical prophets, writing in times of great social upheaval and violence, write of a God who heals the contrite and lifts up the lowly. They promise that there will be no need for weapons: “They will beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2:4). While we are surrounded by violence on every side, we look forward to the day when that will be no more.

Photo: Mother Emanuel AME Church, Charleston, SC, by Kelly Doyle, June 21, 2015, licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

If a man in self-defense uses more than necessary violence, it will be unlawful: whereas if he repels force with moderation, his defense will be lawful. . . . Nor is it necessary for salvation that a man omit the act of moderate self-defense to avoid killing the other man, since one is bound to take more care of one's own life than of another's.⁴

On the other hand, the *Catechism* also acknowledges the nonviolence tradition:

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord recalls the commandment, "You shall not kill," and adds to it the proscription of anger, hatred, and vengeance. Going further, Christ asks his disciples to turn the other cheek, to love their enemies. He did not defend himself and told Peter to leave his sword in its sheath.⁵

The *Catechism* further recognizes the right and duty of public authorities to regulate the production and sale of arms for the common good.⁶

Similarly, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) acknowledges a right to self-defense, while calling for limits on access to guns:

The Church has been a consistent voice for the promotion of peace at home and around the world, and a strong advocate for the reasonable regulation of firearms. Christ's love and mercy must guide us. The Church recognizes that recourse to self-defense is legitimate for one's own safety. In today's world, however, weapons that are increasingly capable of inflicting great suffering in a short period of time are simply too accessible.⁷

Under the mainstream Catholic perspective, then, a gun may be used in self-defense, but only to the extent necessary to defend one's life or the life of another. A homeowner could not shoot a burglar who is not threatening the life of the homeowner or the homeowner's family, since the homeowner's property is not worth more than the burglar's life. And even if one's life is threatened, non-lethal options must be used if available, including retreat. The castle doctrine and stand-your-ground laws are not consistent with Catholic social teaching.

The Catholic nonviolence tradition takes a quite different approach, looking to the teaching and example of Jesus and the witness of the early Church in opposing any use of lethal force, even in self-defense. As the *Catechism* notes, Jesus taught his disciples, not only are they not to kill, but they are not even to be angry with another (Matt. 5:21-22). If attacked, they are to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39; Luke 6:29). They are to love their enemies and pray for those who mistreat them (Matt. 5:44-45; Luke 6:27-28). And if someone takes what is theirs, they are not to demand it back (Luke 6:30).

⁴ *Catechism*, 2264, quoting from the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas.

⁵ *Catechism*, 2262, citing Matt. 5:21, 22-39, 44; 26:52; see *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 496.

⁶ *Catechism*, 2316.

⁷ "A Mercy and Peacebuilding Approach to Gun Violence," USCCB Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development, Jan. 2020, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/backgroundunder-gun-violence>. See also "Responses to the Plague of Gun Violence," Nov. 11, 2019, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/responses-plague-gun-violence>.

Under this tradition, the right of self-defense is seen as a principle of natural law reasoning, but not of Christian discipleship. Jesus rejected any use of force, even in legitimate self-defense, telling his would-be defender in the Garden to put away his sword (Matt. 26:52). He taught that whoever wishes to save his or her life will lose it, but whoever loses it for Jesus' sake will save it (Mark 8:35). And he told his disciples not to fear those who can kill the body but not the soul (Matt. 10:28; Luke 12:4). Thus, in following Jesus' teaching and example, according to this view, Christians are called to give up whatever natural right to self-defense they may have.

The witness of the early Church is seen as consistent with this view. For the first few centuries, Christians refused to use force to defend themselves or each other, following Jesus' example of nonviolence, even in the face of persecution. In imitation of their savior, they chose martyrdom over defensive violence. Jesus' way, and that of the early Church (and of later followers such as Martin Luther King, Jr.) was to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:9-21) and to suffer violence, if necessary, rather than inflict it.

So what is a Christian to do if someone breaks into his or her house? Under this view, the disciple is to love that person as Jesus loves him. If he is hungry or thirsty, the disciple is to give him something to eat or drink. If the intruder wants to take what belongs to the disciple, the disciple is to give it to him. Having a gun in that situation may lead the disciple to act out of fear or anger in a way contrary to Jesus' teaching and example. Not having a gun would hopefully lead the disciple to pray at that moment for a way to defuse the situation (cf. Matt. 10:19), so that none of those involved, including the intruder, would come to any harm. There are many real-life examples of such outcomes.

But what if someone else is being attacked? Doesn't the obligation to love one's neighbor require the disciple to come to that person's defense against the attacker, even using lethal means if necessary? The nonviolence tradition would say yes, as to coming to the neighbor's defense, but no, as to using lethal means. In this situation, the disciple has two neighbors whom the disciple is required to love, both the one being attacked and the attacker. Their lives are of equal worth. Under this view, if the disciple cannot calm the situation, the disciple may need to come between the attacker and his victim, accepting the blows intended for the latter. But shooting the attacker would not be loving him.

Again, the example of Jesus and the early Church is seen as instructive. When the crowd brought to Jesus the woman caught in adultery, wanting to execute her on the spot, Jesus didn't brandish a sword and threaten to run it through anyone who would stone her. He appealed to the crowd's consciences and defused the situation nonviolently (John 8:3-9). And when the early Christians were arrested, their brothers and sisters in faith did not come to their aid with force; they instead resorted to prayer (e.g., Acts 12:5).

Under a nonviolence perspective, for a Christian to rely on a weapon for protection, rather than the power of the resurrection, would be to display a profound lack of trust in God's word.⁸

⁸ Luke 22:36 is sometimes cited as support for the right of Christians to bear arms, but that is a misinterpretation of the verse, as is clear from Jesus' sharp rebuke to the swordsman in Luke 22:51. The *[continued on next page]*

Conversely, if the disciple acts in accordance with Christ's teaching, the disciple can have confidence that God will protect the disciple in the deepest sense, whatever the temporal outcome (see Ps. 27:1-3, 118:6).

Under either of these Catholic perspectives, the daily carnage of gun violence in our society is completely unacceptable. As Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago said just hours after the Highland Park shooting on July 4, 2022, "The right to bear arms does not eclipse the right to life, or the right of all Americans to go about their lives free of the fear that they might be shredded by bullets at any moment. Gun violence is a life issue."⁹

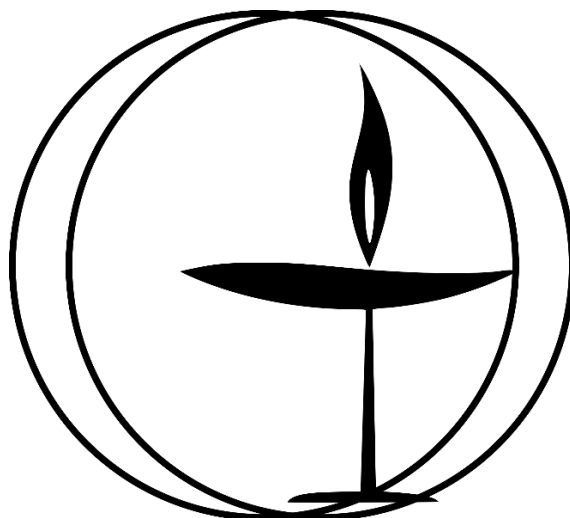
Robert More

Pax Christi - St. John Neumann Church, Reston, VA

Image: Statue of Christ on Purple Background, public domain (CC0).

footnote to Luke 22:38 in *The New American Bible* explains, "*It is enough!*: the farewell discourse ends abruptly with these words of Jesus spoken to the disciples when they take literally what was intended as figurative language about being prepared to face the world's hostility." See Matt. 10:34 for another figurative use of "sword."

⁹ "Statement of Cardinal Blase J. Cupich, Archbishop of Chicago, on the July 4 Mass Shooting in Highland Park," July 4, 2022, <https://www.archchicago.org/en/statement/-/article/2022/07/04/statement-of-cardinal-blase-j-cupich-archbishop-of-chicago-on-the-july-4-mass-shooting-in-highland-park>.



Chapter 6. Unitarian Universalist Perspective on Guns and Gun Violence

Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote seven Principles, which are held as strong values and moral guides.¹ These Principles are lived out within a “living tradition” of wisdom and spirituality, drawn from sources as diverse as science, poetry, scripture, and personal experience. As Rev. Barbara Wells ten Hove explains, “The Principles are not dogma or doctrine, but rather a guide for those of us who choose to join and participate in Unitarian Universalist religious communities.”²

Four of these principles are particularly relevant to the scourge of gun violence in our society.

1st Principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person

Reverence and respect for human nature is at the core of Unitarian Universalist faith. We believe that all the dimensions of our being carry the potential to do good. We celebrate the gifts of being human: our intelligence and capacity for observation and reason, our senses and ability to appreciate beauty, our creativity, our feelings and emotions. We cherish our bodies as well as our souls. We can use our gifts to offer love, to work for justice, to heal injury, to create pleasure for ourselves and others. . . . Unitarian

¹ Editor’s note: This chapter was originally written in 2019. In 2024, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) replaced the Seven Principles “with language describing Unitarian Universalism through [six] shared values, all centered around love.” “Shared Values,” undated, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/shared-values>. The Shared Values—particularly interdependence, justice, and equity—overlap substantially with the four principles discussed in this chapter. According to the UUA, “congregations are free to work with the original seven principles,” but “the UUA itself is drawing our primary inspiration and accountability from the Shared Values.” (Email from UUA dated April 9, 2025.)

² “The Seven Principles,” Unitarian Universalist Association, undated, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>.

Universalists affirm the inherent worth and dignity of each person as a given of faith—an unshakeable conviction calling us to self-respect and respect for others.³

Embedded in the Jewish, Christian, and other religious and spiritual traditions, Unitarian Universalists hold life to be sacred, and we are exhorted to love our neighbors as ourselves. We, therefore, feel the loss of each life to gun violence as a rent in the fabric of our communal life, and we reverberate with the pain which ripples out through immediate families to the wider community and down through the generations.⁴

2nd Principle: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations

Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations points us toward something beyond inherent worth and dignity. It points us to the larger community. It gets at collective responsibility. It reminds us that treating people as human beings is not simply something we do one-on-one, but something that has systemic implications and can inform our entire cultural way of being. Compassion is something that we can easily act on individually. We can demonstrate openness, give people respect, and treat people with kindness on our own. But we need one another to achieve equity and justice.⁵

The increasing tide of the blood of our citizens, gunned down while pursuing their ordinary lives, has reached an intolerable point. Our shared grief and moral outrage impel us to stand up and demand that the rights of the majority to life outweigh the overly influential interests of the few who benefit from the gun industry and its lobbyists.⁶

6th Principle: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all

As naïve or impossible as the sixth Principle may seem, I'm not willing to give up on it. In the face of our culture's apathy and fear, I want to imagine and help create a powerful vision of peace by peaceful means, liberty by liberatory means, justice by just means. I want us to believe—and to live as if we believe—that a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all is possible. There is no guarantee that we will succeed, but I can assure you that we will improve ourselves and improve the world by trying.⁷

Safe and peaceful coexistence within society requires reasonable compromise with the concept of absolute personal liberty.⁸ We recognize that many Americans use firearms for legitimate

³ Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker, "Reflection on the First Principle," undated, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/1st>.

⁴ "Policy Brief: Gun Violence Prevention," Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry of New Jersey (UULMNJ), Feb. 2013, https://uufaithaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/UULMNJ_Gun_Violence_Position_Paper_Feb_2013.pdf.

⁵ Rev. Emily Gage, "Reflection on the Second Principle," May 2007, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/2nd>.

⁶ UULMNJ "Policy Brief: Gun Violence Prevention" (see note 4).

⁷ Rev. Sean Parker Dennison, "Reflection on the Sixth Principle," May 2007, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/6th>.

⁸ Unitarian Universalist Association 1991 Resolution, "Gun Control," July 1, 1991, <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/gun-control>.

reasons, including hunting, target shooting, and self-protection. Many firearms, however, have no legitimate use outside the military. There are also many locations where possession of firearms is inappropriate, such as schools and churches, and permission to carry firearms in public needs to be tightly controlled.

While most adults should be able to own firearms, individuals who have been determined to have committed illegal acts of violence or have a history of dangerous mental illness cannot possess firearms without creating unjustified risks to the safety of others. Even legitimate firearms may pose an unwarranted danger to innocent people when they are stored or transported inappropriately. We also support a legal requirement that firearms be manufactured in a manner that reduces their potential for harm.⁹

7th Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part

Our seventh Principle, respect for the interdependent web of all existence, is . . . our response to the great dangers of both individualism and oppression. It is our solution to the seeming conflict between the individual and the group. Our seventh Principle may be our Unitarian Universalist way of coming to fully embrace something greater than ourselves. The interdependent web—expressed as the spirit of life, the ground of all being, the oneness of all existence, the community-forming power, the process of life, the creative force, even God—can help us develop that social understanding of ourselves that we and our culture so desperately need. It is a source of meaning to which we can dedicate our lives.¹⁰

Recent polling shows that the majority of gun owners support commonsense regulation of guns, as they recognize that their rights to own guns for self-protection and sport are not interfered with by such regulations. For our social contract as members of this society to succeed, we must balance rights with responsibilities. As citizens, we affirm this understanding daily by abiding by laws regarding automobile safety, as well as laws that regulate business practices, food and drug safety, and other such measures that contribute to public wellbeing. Our pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness often depends on limiting the untrammelled rights of others to harm us.

Responsible Gun Ownership

In light of these principles, Unitarian Universalists call for laws “that keep **some guns** out of the hands of all people, and **all guns** out of the hands of some people.”¹¹ Specifically, the delegates to the 2016 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly called upon state and federal legislators

⁹ UULMNJ “Policy Brief: Gun Violence Prevention” (see note 4).

¹⁰ Rev. Forrest Gilmore, “Reflection on the Sixth Principle,” May 2007, <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/7th>.

¹¹ “Some Guns, All Guns: Legislating Appropriate Restrictions: 2016 Action of Immediate Witness,” July 1, 2016, <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/some-guns-all-guns-legislating-appropriate-restrictions> (emphasis in original).

“to make it a crime for civilians to knowingly import, sell, manufacture, retrofit or transfer a semiautomatic assault weapon or large capacity ammunition feeding device” and “to implement comprehensive, universal background checks.”¹² Unitarian Universalists have further called for the Center for Disease Control and Prevention to study and publish data on gun violence and for laws to promote gun safety.¹³

Robert J. Hatfield¹⁴

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fairfax

Image: Flaming chalice symbol, public domain (CC0).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Affirming Congregational Commitment to Gun Violence Prevention: 2014 Action of Immediate Witness,” July 1, 2014, <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/affirming-congregational-commitment-gun-violence-prevention>.

¹⁴ Robert Hatfield, who died in 2020, and the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fairfax were among the leaders in the gun violence prevention movement in northern Virginia. See also the dedication of this toolkit to Robert Hatfield and two other departed GVP warriors, Rev. James Atwood and Patricia Johnson, on page ii.



Chapter 7. Hindu Perspectives on Gun Violence¹

Peace is an essential part of Hinduism.² Gun violence is contrary to Hinduism because it offends against peace and the spirit of ahimsa.

Ahimsa

In Sanskrit, *himsa* is doing harm or causing injury. The “a” placed before the word negates it. Very simply, ahimsa is abstaining from causing hurt or harm. It is gentleness and noninjury, whether physical, mental or emotional. The term nonviolence speaks only to the most extreme forms of wrongdoing, while ahimsa (which includes not killing) goes much deeper to prohibit the subtle abuse and the simple hurt.³

Ahimsa represents love, sacrifice, forgiveness, and the absence of enmity. Ahimsa comes from within you and implies total nonviolence and no passive violence. Our beliefs, attitude, and actions directly interact to produce peace or violence.⁴

Types of nonviolence are:

- Nonresistance
- Moral resistance
- Selective nonviolence
- Passive resistance
- Active reconciliation

¹ Om, shown above, is the most sacred symbol of Hinduism. It is a symbol of peace, tranquility and unity, of Good versus Evil. See Chapter 14 below for more on the meaning and use of Om.

² Anjum, Muhammed, “Concept of Peace in World’s Major Religions: An Analysis,” *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, Volume 7, Issue 4, April 2017 248 ISSN 2250-3153.

³ H.H. Gurudeva Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, “The Hindu Ethic of Non-Violence,”

www.himalayanacademy.com/readlearn/basics/ahimsa-nonviolence.

⁴ Ibid.

- Nonviolent direct action
- Satyagraha
- Nonviolent revolution

Practice ahimsa in your day-to-day interactions through harmony, friendliness, respect, understanding, generosity, listening, forgiveness, making amends, praising, courage, smiling, caring, believing, healing, faith, contemplation, humility, reverence, gratitude, integrity, acceptance, inspiration, love, graciousness, kindness, unity, accountability, compassion, honor, choice, equality, giving, service, and celebration.

You can also strengthen peace and nonviolence through education, social networks, and creating dialogues between communities.

Reinforce nonviolence within your family life. Raise your children in a peaceful environment at home. Parents must teach children to appreciate those who are different, those who believe differently. Teach them the openness that they need to live in a pluralistic world where others have their unique ways, their life and culture. Teach them the value of human diversity and the narrow-mindedness of a provincial outlook. Give them the tools to live in a world of differences without feeling threatened, without forcing their ways or their will on others. Teach them that it never helps to hurt another of our brothers or sisters.⁵

Ahimsa is the highest dharma. Ahimsa is the best tapas. Ahimsa is the greatest gift. Ahimsa is the highest self-control. Ahimsa is the highest sacrifice. Ahimsa is the highest power. Ahimsa is the highest friend. Ahimsa is the highest truth. Ahimsa is the highest teaching. – Mahabharata XVIII:116.37-41.

Ahimsa is not causing pain to any living being at any time through the actions of one's mind, speech or body. – Sandilya Upanishad

Karma and Reincarnation

We believe in karma and reincarnation. What we have done to others will be done to us, if not in this life, then in another. Violence that a Hindu commits will return to them by a cosmic process that is unerring. Two thousand years ago, South India's weaver saint Tiruvalluvar said, "All suffering recoils on the wrongdoer himself. Therefore, those who desire not to suffer, refrain from causing others pain."⁶

Peace and Nonviolence from Various Hindu Texts⁷

Let us have concord with our own people, and concord with people who are strangers to us; Asvins, create between us and the strangers a unity of hearts. May we unite in our midst, unite in our purposes, and not fight against the divine spirit within us. Let not the battle-cry

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Curated by the Himalayan Academy, www.himalayanacademy.com/readlearn/basics/ahimsa-nonviolence.

rise amidst many slain, nor the arrows of the War-God fall with the break of day. – Atharva Veda⁸

One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one's own self. This, in brief, is the rule of dharma. Yielding to desire and acting differently, one becomes guilty of adharma. – Mahabharata XVIII:113.8.

Those high-souled persons who desire beauty, faultlessness of limbs, long life, understanding, mental and physical strength and memory should abstain from acts of injury. – Mahabharata XVIII:115.8.

It is the principle of the pure in heart never to injure others, even when they themselves have been hatefully injured. – Tiru Kural, Verse 312.

What is virtuous conduct? It is never destroying life, for killing leads to every other sin. – Tirukural, Verse 321

Many are the lovely flowers of worship offered to the Guru, but none lovelier than non-killing. Respect for life is the highest worship, the bright lamp, the sweet garland and unwavering devotion. – Tirumantiram, Verse 197

May all beings look at me with a friendly eye. May I do likewise, and may we all look on each other with the eyes of a friend. – Yajur Veda: 36.18.

Spiritual merit and sin are our own making. The killer of other lives is an outcast. Match your words with your conduct. Steal not, kill not, indulge not in self-praise, condemn not others to their face. – Lingayat Vacanas

When one is established in non-injury, beings give up their mutual animosity in his presence. – Yoga Sutras

The injury that we have caused to heaven and earth, mother or father--from that sin may the domestic fire ceremony pull us out. – Taittiriya Aranyaka

The peace in the sky, the peace in the mid-air, the peace on earth, the peace in waters, the peace in plants, the peace in forest trees, the peace in all Gods, the peace in Brahman, the peace in all things, the peace in peace, may that peace come to me. – Rig Veda X

Do not injure the beings living on the earth, in the air and in the water. – Yajur Veda

The Lord said, "Fearlessness, purity of heart, steadfastness in knowledge and devotion, alms-giving, self-control and sacrifice, study of the scriptures, austerity and uprightness, nonviolence, truth, freedom from anger, renunciation, tranquility, aversion to slander, compassion to all living beings, freedom from covetousness, gentleness, modesty, courage, patience, fortitude, purity and freedom from malice and overweening conceit—these

⁸ "The Asvins . . . are inseparable twin gods of medicine and healing who occupy an important place in Hindu pantheon" <https://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/concepts/aswins.asp>.

belong to him who is born to the heritage of the Gods, O Arjuna.” – Bhagavad Gita:
Chapter 16

Hindu Leaders Speak on Ahimsa

Use no violence even to gain possession of a woman, wealth or kingdom. Nonviolence is the greatest of all religions. – Swami Sahajanand

O lover of meditation, become pure and clean. Observe nonviolence in mind, speech and body. Never break another’s heart. Avoid wounding another’s feelings. Harm no one. Help all. Neither be afraid nor frighten others. – Swami Muktananda

Someone who believes in violence and continues causing injury to others can never be peaceful himself. – Swami Satchidananda

To be free from violence is the duty of every man. No thought of revenge, hatred or ill will should arise in our minds. Injuring others gives rise to hatred. – Swami Sivananda

You do not like to suffer yourself. How can you inflict suffering on others? Every killing is a suicide. – Ramana Maharishi, 1935

By ahimsa Patanjali meant the removal of the desire to kill. All forms of life have an equal right to the air of maya. The saint who uncovers the secret of creation will be in harmony with Nature’s countless bewildering expressions. All men may understand this truth by overcoming the passion for destruction. – Sri Yukteswar to Paramahansa Yogananda.

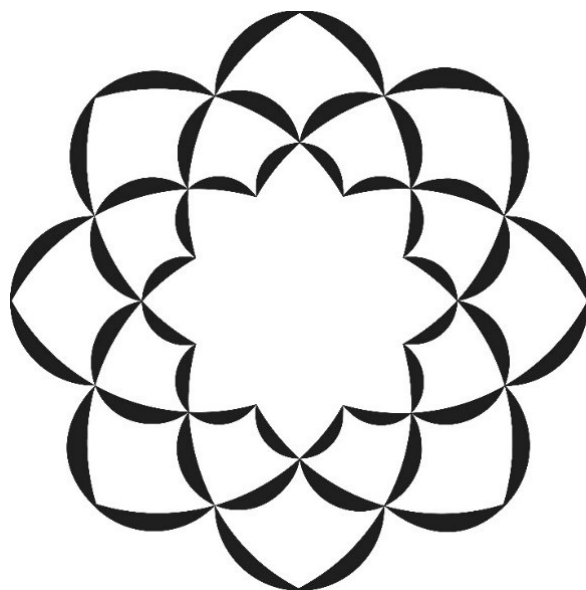
If you plant eggplant, you can pluck eggplants. If you sow goodness, you can reap goodness. If you sow evil, you will reap evil. Do good to all. God is there, within you. Don’t kill. Don’t harbor anger. – Siva Yogaswami

The test of ahimsa is the absence of jealousy. The man whose heart never cherishes even the thought of injury to anyone, who rejoices at the prosperity of even his greatest enemy, that man is the bhakta, he is the yogi, he is the guru of all. – Swami Vivekananda

We are all of the same race and religion. We are holy beings established in Divinity itself. This truth can be understood only by those who have grasped it through the magical charm of a life of dharma—not by other means. Because of that, sages have emphatically proclaimed again and again that it is necessary to love all existing lives as one’s own. – Siva Yogaswami.

Gayatri Manoharan
Moms Demand Action, Burke-Fairfax, VA

Image: Om symbol, public domain (CC0).



Chapter 8. Buddhist Perspective on Guns and Gun Violence

The founder of Buddhism, Shakyamuni (Gautama Siddhartha), is known for his efforts at diplomacy to avoid war, endeavoring through dialogue to convince rulers to forgo armed aggression. Buddhism identifies ignorance as the cause of suffering, conflict, and war. This fundamental inability or unwillingness to recognize the inherent value of life, called fundamental darkness, leads people to disregard the suffering of others and conclude that there are things more important than human life and dignity. It creates the willingness to sacrifice others for selfish gains.

Nichiren Daishonin, the founder of Nichiren Buddhism, saw peace as the natural outcome of elevating the collective life state of the people, writing, “There are not two lands, pure or impure in themselves. The difference lies solely in the good or evil of our minds.”¹

In his treatise “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land,” Nichiren urged people to pray for peace, saying, “If you care anything about your personal security, you should first of all pray for order and tranquility throughout the four quarters of the land, should you not?”²

Soka Gakkai International (SGI) President Daisaku Ikeda, who has worked to actualize and widely disseminate these ideals of Nichiren Buddhism, has said, “True and lasting peace will only be realized by forging life-to-life bonds of trust and friendship among the world’s people. Human solidarity is built by opening our hearts to each other. This is the power of dialogue.”

¹ “On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime,” written in 1255, *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 4, <https://www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/wnd-1/Content/1>.

² “On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land,” written in 1260, *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 24, <https://www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/wnd-1/Content/2>.

In light of these principles, Buddhists decry the epidemic of gun violence in the United States. In response to the October 1, 2017, mass shooting in Las Vegas, Nevada, that claimed 58 lives, SGI-USA issued the following statement:

The members of the Soka Gakkai International-USA Buddhist community send condolences and deepest sympathy to the loved ones of those killed and wounded in the tragic and senseless act of violence that occurred Sunday night in Las Vegas. We commend the police and emergency services personnel who responded and continue to provide their professional support.

It may be perfectly understandable to go numb to the tragedy of the multiple mass shootings our country has experienced. After all, how can one make sense of this nightmare repeating itself, seemingly without end? Whether an elementary school in Newtown, a shopping mall in Oregon, a temple in Wisconsin, a movie theater in Aurora, a nightclub in Orlando, or a music festival in Las Vegas, the pain is overwhelming; but we will not go numb. We are horrified.

It is not normal. It is unthinkable. As individuals and as a society, we must reject modes of thinking that diminish the dignity of human life. We must not allow senseless violence to define our era. This is our challenge. As SGI President Daisaku Ikeda has stated:

The real struggle of the 21st century will not be between civilizations, nor between religions. It will be between violence and nonviolence. It will be between barbarity and civilization in the truest sense of the word.

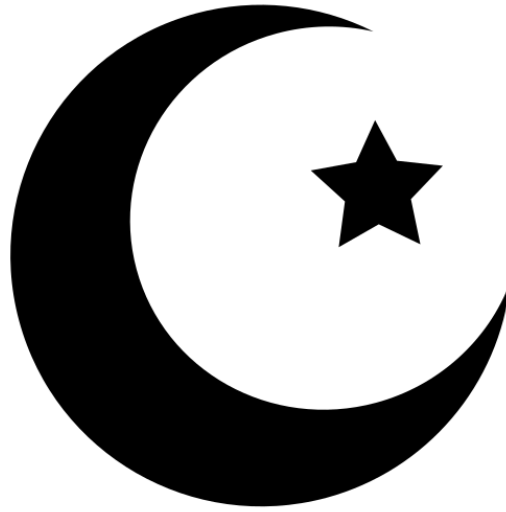
We must come together to take meaningful action in all spheres to prevent more tragedies like this.

As members of the SGI-USA Buddhist community, we mourn the victims of this tragedy. But more importantly, we will honor their memory by renewing hope and taking unstinting, relentless action to move the people and society of America toward the construction of a culture of peace.³

Daniel Hall
Director of Public Affairs
Soka Gakkai International-USA
Washington DC Buddhist Center

Image: Lotus logo, courtesy of Soka Gakkai International-USA

³ "SGI-USA Statement on the Mass Shooting in Las Vegas," Oct. 3, 2017, available at <https://bit.ly/SGI-USA-statement>.



Chapter 9. Islamic Perspectives on Violence and Gun Violence¹

Islam, as the word itself suggests, has connotations of peace and submission,² promotes peace and love, categorically denounces illegitimate violence, and unequivocally rejects any act of transgression. “The primary principle in Islam is peace. Islam emphasizes peace in communication with all Muslim and non-Muslim people in a society and encourages its adherents to avoid war and violence.”³

Compassion, forgiveness, and resilience are integral to Islam and are the foremost virtues for brave and patient Muslims, especially when facing adversity. Harboring resentment or seeking revenge are strictly prohibited, even during the most hostile situations. A well-known concept of a Muslim warrior being spat upon and forgiving his enemy reflects the profound teachings of Islam on forgiveness and resilience. “Islam even forbids sports that use animals as targets or involve striking the face of a fellow human being.”⁴

The personal life of the Messenger of God, Prophet Muhammad, was a living example of peace and nonviolence. “Neither physical nor verbal violence was ever attributed to him. In his teaching, violence against all creatures is prohibited. Although he did defend himself when he and his followers were attacked, he made peace dominate as soon as it was possible, even at the risk of his own life.”⁵ He defined the faithful as “those most restrained from violence” and

¹ The Interfaith Network is grateful to Mustafa Ozguler, Secretary of Islamic Society of Northeast Ohio, for this essay. Mr. Ozguler is a member of the Interfaith Violence Prevention Coalition of Stark County, Ohio.

² Zeki Saritoprak, “An Islamic Approach to Peace and Nonviolence: A Turkish Experience,” *The Muslim World*, Volume 95, Issue 3, pages 413–427, July 2005, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2005.00102.x>.

³ Abbas Yazdani. “The culture of peace and religious tolerance from an Islamic perspective,” *Veritas* no.47 Valparaíso Dec. 2020, https://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0718-92732020000300151.

⁴ Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research Canada, “What Islam Says about Peace and Violence,” <https://yaqeeninstitute.ca/what-islam-says-about/islam-and-violence#does-islam-promote-violence>.

⁵ Saritoprak, “An Islamic Approach to Peace and Nonviolence” (see note 2).

exemplified nonviolent resistance to the oppression in Mecca by the elite, ruling that “there should be neither harming nor reciprocating harm.”⁶

In his description of Muslims, the Prophet says, “The Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand the people are safe, and the believer is the one from whom the people’s lives and wealth are safe.”⁷ He fought for the eradication of violence in all walks of life, starting with the family. He never accepted violence and discrimination against women and girls. He protected their rights and dignity. Because Islam strictly forbids cruelty and violence against anyone or anything, he assigned every believer to help those in need, to protect and save those in distress, and to introduce love and trust to the environment in which they live.

Quranic verses provide clear guidance and justify violence only as a last resort and in a manner of self-defense. “There is not a single verse in the Quran that calls for an unmitigated or unqualified cause of violence.”⁸ Hence, the Quran says, “Fight for the cause of God with those who fight you, but do not be aggressive: God does not like aggressors” (2:190). The Quran allows warlike violence, again only as self-defense, against the direct threat of armed attackers (2:190, 4:75, 8:19, and 9:12-13). Any scholar who rigorously and righteously studies Islam would acknowledge that “violence and cruelty are not in the spirit of the Quran, nor are they found in the life of the Prophet, nor the lives of saintly Muslims.”⁹ Philip Jenkins, the author of *Jesus Wars*, also affirms that violence in the Quran is largely a defense against attack.¹⁰

According to Islamic Hermeneutics and theology,¹¹ none of the Quranic verses can be used for blanket endorsements of violence. On the contrary, the Quran allows and emphasizes proportionality in warfare and provides a strong mandate for making peace: “Whoever transgresses against you, respond in kind” (2:194). And “Had Allah wished, He would have made them dominate you and so if they leave you alone and do not fight you and offer you peace, then Allah allows you no way against them” (4:90). John L. Esposito, a prominent professor of Islamic Studies, clearly confirms that “from the earliest times, it was forbidden to kill noncombatants as well as women and children and monks and rabbis, who were given the promise of immunity unless they had taken part in the fighting.”¹²

⁶ Sunan Ibn Majah. Vol. 3, Book 13, Hadith 2340.

⁷ Al-Bukhari, Book II (Belief), Hadith 10.

⁸ Mohamed Alagteaa. “Is Gun Violence A ‘Muslim Issue?’” *Muslim*, May 12, 2020, <https://muslim.co/is-gun-violence-a-muslim-issue>.

⁹ Nissim Rejwan, *The Many Faces of Islam: Perspectives on a Resurgent Civilization*, University Press of Florida, 2000, ISBN:9780813018072.

¹⁰ Barbara Bradley Hagerty, “Is The Bible More Violent Than The Quran?” National Public Radio, Mar. 18, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/2010/03/18/124494788/is-the-bible-more-violent-than-the-quran>. See Philip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*, HarperOne, 2010, ISBN: 9780061768941.

¹¹ The Quran, the holy book of Islam, and its spiritual, ethical, and legal teachings can best be understood with the knowledge of the Islamic Hermeneutics, which is the science of explaining the Quran. Because the revelation of the Quran took 23 years, learning and understanding of each verse’s context is critical.

¹² John L. Esposito, “Islam and Political Violence,” *Religions* 2015, Vol 6, Issue 3, pp. 1067–1081, Sept. 10, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel6031067>, ISSN 2077-1444.

According to Esposito, “The Quran does not command or condone illegitimate violence and terrorism. At the same time, early Quranic verses did affirm the right to respond to aggression, and to counter persecution and attack by Meccan rivals: “Permission is given to those who fight because they were wronged. Surely Allah is capable of giving them victory. Those who were driven out of their homes unjustly, merely for saying ‘Our Lord is Allah’” (22:39–40). Muslims are urged to fight with great commitment so that victory will come, and the battle will end: “If you meet them in battle, inflict on them such a defeat as would be a lesson for those who come after them, and that they may be warned” (8:57). However, as is noted in the same passage, if they propose peace, then the fighting must end: “But if they are inclined to peace, make peace with them, and have trust in God for he hears all and knows everything” (8:61).¹³ As important, “violence must be proportional, that only the necessary amount of force should be used to repel the enemy, and that innocent civilians should not be targeted, and that jihad must be declared by the ruler or head of state.”¹⁴

Expectedly, the Quran gives human life the highest value: “Do not attempt to take another human being’s life, which God made sacred.”(17:33). It continues its guidance by saying, “And if you lay your hand on me to kill me, I will not do the same, for I fear my Lord, the master of the universe, too much to commit such a crime!” (5:28). And it strictly forbids any killing: “Whoever slays a human being not convicted of murder . . . is considered the slayer of all mankind. Whoever saves the life of a single human being is considered to have saved the life of all mankind!” (5:32). Therefore, killing is a crime according to Quran, and “these verses make that quite clear: To fear God requires us to respect the life of others, to respect others.”¹⁵

One of the concepts frequently misunderstood by Muslims and non-Muslims is the term “jihad” in Islam. The Quran and Prophet clearly provided guidelines for the Jihad. Jihad “means to make an effort, to endeavour, and to strive for a particular cause. There are three categories of Jihad:”

1. The greatest Jihad – The process of striving within one’s own self, the effort of purifying oneself, the struggle against one’s evil tendencies, the struggle to be moral, modest, humble, kind, loving, helpful, and all other good attributes one can think of.
2. The great Jihad – To spread the true message and teachings of Islam. However, the Quran clearly teaches that there is no compulsion in the matter of religion (Holy Quran, Ch. 2:257). Everyone is free to choose whether to believe or not to believe; there is no compulsion.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “The Quran Does Not Give Carte Blanche to Commit Violence,” Oct. 23, 2023, *Le Monde*, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2023/10/23/the-quran-does-not-give-carte-blanche-to-commit-violence_6195379_23.html.

3. The lesser Jihad – The lowest form of Jihad, the physical Jihad. However, Islam only grants this Permission in order to “defend” oneself in certain circumstances, not to “offend or hurt” anyone.

If a person were to attack you, destroy your home, hurt or even kill your children and your loved ones, would you stand by and watch him do so? Surely, you would defend yourself. In the same way, Islam teaches to be patient first and to turn to self-defense as a last resort.¹⁶

Islam recognizes that the primary source of violence is ignorance: the ignorance of the actual meaning of life, the ignorance of one’s own religion, lack of knowledge about others, other cultures, other faiths, etc. “As the U.K.’s MI5 briefing report on radicalization (2008) concluded, ‘far from being religious zealots, a large number of those involved in terrorism do not practice their faith regularly. Many lack religious literacy and could be regarded as religious novices.’ Contrary to conventional wisdom, the report concluded that a well-established religious identity actually protects against violent radicalization.”¹⁷

Since its inception, Islam’s foremost strategy to fight violence has been to fight ignorance: The very first verse of the Quran revealed to the Prophet of Islam in 611 AD reads:

“Recite: In the name of thy Lord who created man from a clot. Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous Who taught by the pen, taught man that which he knew not.” (96:1-5)

“And they shall say had we but listened or used reason, we would not be among the inmates of the burning fire.” (67:10)

“Are those who have knowledge and those who have no knowledge alike? Only the men of understanding are mindful.” (39:9)

Islam encourages believers to seek knowledge throughout their lives and highlights the distinction between those who know and those who do not (39:9). Spending time seeking knowledge is associated with a rise in rank (58:11) in the Quran, and all believers are encouraged to pursue knowledge and use reason based on sense and observation. The Quran teaches every Muslim man and woman how to pray, “My Lord! Enrich me with knowledge” (20:114).

The following quotes of the Prophet Muhammad may shed further light on how Islam has fought ignorance and, therefore, violence:

“Seek knowledge even though it be in China.”

“The acquisition of knowledge is compulsory for every Muslim, whether male or female.”

¹⁶ Mansoor Ahmad Malik, “Islam Condemns Terrorism,” *The Reykavík Grapevine*, Nov. 27, 2015, <https://grapevine.is/mag/column-opinion/2015/11/27/islam-condemns-terrorism>.

¹⁷ Esposito, “Islam and Political Violence” (see note 12).

“The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr.”

“Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.”

“God has revealed to me, ‘Whoever walks in the pursuit of knowledge, I facilitate for him the way to heaven.’”

“The best form of worship is the pursuit of knowledge.”

“Scholars should endeavor to spread knowledge and provide education to people who have been deprived of it. For, where knowledge is hidden, it disappears.”

Someone asked the Prophet: “Who is the biggest scholar?” He replied: “He who is constantly trying to learn from others, for a scholar is ever hungry for more knowledge.”

“Seek knowledge and wisdom, or whatever the vessel from which it flows; you will never be the loser.”

“To listen to the words of the learned and to instill unto others the lessons of science is better than religious exercises.”¹⁸

These quotes and many verses in the Quran signify that “the Islamic civilization was built on philosophy and science, on the thirst for knowledge, and on the thirst for learning. And that this thirst is not limited by cultural boundaries: All knowledge and all learning, whatever the field, whatever the cultural origin, is light, enrichment, and fulfillment.”¹⁹ Hence, “for more than one thousand years, the Islamic Empire remained the most advanced civilization in the world. The main reasons for this were that Islam stressed the importance and respect of learning, forbade destruction, and cultivated a respect for authority, discipline, and tolerance for other religions. The teachings of the Quran and Sunnah (the Prophet Muhammad’s way of life and legal precedent) inspired many Muslims to accomplish their accomplishments in science and medicine.”²⁰

Views of American Muslims and Contributions of Muslim Associations Towards Preventing Gun Violence in the United States

American Muslims are extraordinarily disturbed by different communities suffering from mass shootings and gun violence in the United States, as they are categorically and unequivocally against violence. According to the American Muslim Poll 2022 survey, which was analyzed by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU), a nonpartisan and nonprofit organization, most American Muslims believe laws covering the sale of firearms should be stricter.²¹

¹⁸ Ibrahim Bijli Syed, “The Pleasures of Seeking Knowledge,” *Islamicity*, Feb. 19, 2019, <https://www.islamicity.org/6580/the-pleasures-of-seeking-knowledge>.

¹⁹ “The Quran Does Not Give Carte Blanche to Commit Violence” (see note 15).

²⁰ Syed, “The Pleasures of Seeking Knowledge” (see note 18).

²¹ Erum Ikramullah, “Most American Muslims Believe Laws Covering the Sale of Firearms [continued on next page]

American Muslim associations have always been supportive of preventing and ending gun violence as well. They call on mosques nationwide to have sermons on the issue of gun violence, asking their congregations to call on their representatives to bring about a solution to end gun violence in America. They also join interfaith coalitions and other religious groups on this issue. For example, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) is a member of Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence and previously the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (CSGV).²² Together with those coalitions, Muslim associations have signed petitions to lawmakers to reinstitute a ban on military-style assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, require background checks on all gun buyers, and make gun trafficking a federal crime. In this regard, ISNA has developed the following policy options:²³

- Keep guns out of the hands of dangerous criminals and those with serious mental illness by closing gaps in the background check system, including requiring criminal background checks for all gun sales.
- Support policies that enhance law enforcement's ability to combat the flow of illegal guns into our communities and enforce existing gun laws.
- Support new technologies to help law enforcement more effectively trace crime guns and support the development of safety features to childproof guns.
- Urge firearms retailers to implement protocols aimed at preventing "straw purchases" and the sales of firearms to prohibited purchasers.

ISNA supports and reaffirms the constitutional right of all citizens to bear arms and calls for sensible federal policies to ensure that guns stay out of the hands of those who pose a risk to society. Hence, the United States Council of Muslim Organizations (USCMO), the most extensive umbrella of Muslim-American organizations, also supports gun-safety legislative initiatives and calls on U.S. political leadership and scholars at every level to delve deeper into the root causes of growing gun violence in our nation.²⁴

Image: Star and crescent, public domain (CCO).

Should Be Stricter," Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, June 10, 2022, <https://www.ispu.org/views-on-gun-control>.

²² CSGV and its sister organization, the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence (EFGV), ceased operations in 2022 after EFGV merged with the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Prevention and Policy to become the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions.

²³ Islamic Society of North America, "Preventing and Ending Gun Violence," <https://isna.net/gun-violence>.

²⁴ United States Council of Muslim Organizations, "USCMO, American Muslims, Support U.S. Bipartisan Gun Control Framework as First Step," June 16, 2022, <https://uscmo.org/2022/06/16/uscmo-american-muslims-support-u-s-bipartisan-gun-control-framework-as-first-step>.

Communal Services



Chapter 10. Gun Violence Prevention Shabbat Service

This chapter provides ideas and resources for integrating special readings, music, and commentary into a gun violence prevention (GVP) Shabbat service. Included are links to materials that you and your rabbi, cantor, or lay leaders may find helpful in creating a meaningful service.¹

Connecting Jewish Values and Gun Violence Prevention

The following Jewish texts are often cited in support of GVP advocacy:²

- “Thou shalt not murder” (Exodus 20:13).
- “Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor” (Leviticus 19:16).
- “He who takes one life it is as though he has destroyed the universe and he who saves one life it is as though he has saved the universe” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5).
- “And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2:4).
- “Justice, justice shall you pursue” (Exodus 23:8).
- “It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it” (Pirkei Avot 2:16).

Reform Jewish Guides

The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC) has prepared a “Wear Orange Shabbat Service Guide” and a “Gun Violence Shabbat Guide 2022” (RAC Guides)³ that include prayers,

¹ For suggestions regarding planning a GVP Shabbat service and activities that can be held in conjunction with it, see Chapter 19, Section 8 (page 91) of this toolkit, “GVP-Themed Worship Services.”

² For more detailed background information, see Chapter 1 of this toolkit.

³ <https://bit.ly/RAC-guide>; https://rac.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/gvp_shabbat_guide_120622.pdf. Additional resources are available on the RAC website, <https://rac.org/issues/gun-violence-prevention>.

readings, and sermon starters. These materials can be used as they are for a GVP-themed service, or they can be used as a starting point for development of a unique service.

Content Ideas for Specific Sections of the GVP Shabbat Service

Friday Evening

- *Barchu*. Emphasize turning from darkness to light.
 - Although the two readings below do not address gun violence prevention specifically, they present the theme of working together to turn from this deadly scourge to a time of safety.
 - Rami Shapiro, “More Darkness than Light,” *Accidental Grace* (2015), reprinted in *Reconstructionist Siddur*, p. 39—poem that recognizes the presence of darkness but the ability to overcome fear by taking one step at a time.
 - Hershel Matt, Interpretive *Hashkiveinu*, *Reconstructionist Siddur*, p. 83—poem that more explicitly uses God language for overcoming fear than Shapiro’s poem.
 - Introductory Prayer: “As we gather this Shabbat . . .” or “Our God and God of all people . . .,” RAC Guides.

Friday Evening or Shabbat Morning

- *Ahavat Olam* (God’s Love in *Torah*; precedes recitation of the *Shema*)
 - Rami Shapiro, “Unending Love,” *Accidental Grace*, reprinted in *Reconstructionist Siddur*, p. 65—poem that is not about gun violence prevention, but provides solace when a community, family, or any group of humans is in need of consolation.
 - Reading: “When we watch the news after each senseless act of violence . . .” or “Time and time again, we watch news stories . . .,” RAC Guides.
- *Mi Shebeirach*
 - Reading before the *Mi Shebeirach*: “As we pray for those members of our community in need of healing, let our thoughts include all those suffering from our nation’s scourge of gun violence. May their wounds, whether of body or mind, be soon healed and may they, their families, and friends find renewed strength, joy, and purpose in life.”
 - Song: “Tree of Life” by Nefesh Mountain (Doni Zasloff and Eric Lindberg)—dedicated to the victims of the 2018 Tree of Life shooting, this song is about communal support that can lead to healing and overcoming despair.⁴ It begins with “O Sweet Spirit, hear my prayer. Help these words heal someone out there.”
- *Mourner’s Kaddish*
 - Read the names of individuals killed by gun violence. These might be local victims over the past year, those killed in a specific event that is being commemorated by the service (e.g., Tree of Life, Sandy Hook, Buffalo, Uvalde), or other victims in a category that will have particular meaning for the congregation (e.g., victims of hate crimes, victims under age 18).

⁴ Written Oct. 28, 2018, <https://www.nefeshmountain.com/mediastore/tree-of-life-sheet-music-download>.

- Read a generic reference to “all those whose lives were cut short by gun violence.” This can be embellished by listing national or local statistics, including a breakdown of categories such as victims of mass shootings, victims of domestic violence, those who died by gun suicide, etc.
- If at your synagogue, only mourners and those observing *yahrzeits* typically rise during the recitation of *Kaddish*, invite the entire congregation to rise for all gun violence victims halfway through the Mourner’s *Kaddish* prayer.
- Reading: “As we read the Mourner’s *Kaddish*, let us remember . . . ,” RAC Guides.
- Reading: “A *Kaddish* after Gun Violence, for When Humanity Fails Itself,” Rabbi Paul Kipnes, October 2, 2017.⁵
- Reading and discussion, “These Are Our Neighbors: Remembering Victims of Gun Violence,” Virginia Avniel Spatz, January 20, 2016.⁶
- Song: “How many times?” by S. Glabman—opens with images of bullet flying, a cell phone that is not answered; the refrain, “How many times less to say I love you . . .” invokes the pain of losing loved ones to gun violence.⁷
- *Aleinu*
 - Judy Chicago’s *Aleinu*, “Merger Poem,” which can be set to music.⁸ It circles back to the idea of communal well-being, which is implicit in ending violence, even though this poem is not explicitly about gun violence prevention. If “A *Kaddish* after Gun Violence . . .” or “How many times?” are included in the service, we suggest reading/singing Judy Chicago’s *Aleinu* after *Kaddish* because it has an uplifting message that will bring the congregation back to a Shabbat mood.

Shabbat Morning

- *Amidah*—include Priestly Blessing, but use GVP language, e.g.,
 - May the Eternal bless us and protect us from the scourge of gun violence. *Ken y’hi ratzon* (May it be God’s will).
 - May the Eternal’s face give you the light and show you the favor needed to help keep all our communities safe. *Ken y’hi ratzon* (May it be God’s will).
 - May the Eternal’s face be lifted toward you, and bestow peace upon you and upon anyone at risk for gun violence. *Ken y’hi ratzon* (May it be God’s will).
- *Torah* Service
 - If possible, link the *Parsha* or *Haftarah* to the theme of gun violence prevention. Some texts are more readily applicable than others, and you will want to discuss this with your Rabbi. For example, if the service is scheduled to commemorate the Sandy Hook anniversary, the *Torah* readings are usually the final verses in Genesis. A speaker may establish a connection, such as Jacob’s pain when he thought his son

⁵ <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/kaddish-after-gun-violence-when-humanity-fails-itself>.

⁶ <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/these-are-our-neighbors-remembering-victims-gun-violence>.

⁷ We were unable to find a link to this song, but your cantor may be able to locate it.

⁸ <https://ritualwell.org/ritual/merger-poem>.

had been killed. Although he was reunited with his lost son, a parent cannot be reunited with a child whose life has been lost to gun violence.

- Bring forward GVP activists for an *Aliyah* (honor).
- Small communities may be able to have people pair up and talk about any experience or involvement with gun violence, provided clergy are prepared for surfacing of traumatic events. Congregations that have a hybrid in-person/online service will want to consider the process for involving those who are in the sanctuary and those who are online.
- After the *Torah* reading, before putting the scrolls away
 - Read a prayer for our country, which can be introduced with a call for legislation that will further gun violence prevention.
 - Work into a Prayer for Peace language that there will be no more violence in our communities.

Additional Resources

- “Faced with gun violence/We grieve . . .” prayer from the Temple Sinai (DC) Memorial to the Lost Dedication Ceremony, October 2, 2016—touches on the concepts of loss, healing, wisdom, and action.⁹
- “As we begin this session of learning . . .” prayer by Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe, Temple Rodef Shalom (Falls Church, VA), October 14, 2021—thematic emphasis on advocacy, education, action, and perseverance to end gun violence.¹⁰
- Prayer for Preventing Gun Violence, “Guardian of life, liberty, and the promise of peace . . .,” Temple Micah (DC), RAC Guides—invokes Jeremiah 29:7.
- Additional Prayers, RAC Guides. Prayers that are not specific to loss resulting from gun violence, but that are easily applied to that situation: “After a Trauma,” “A Time of Anxiety,” and “Prayer for a Loss.”¹¹

Guest Speakers and Sermons

- Consider inviting a guest speaker to address the congregation on a Friday evening, Shabbat morning, or for a special program after the *kiddush* that follows the Shabbat morning service. The latter allows more time for an in-depth program, but it is likely to draw a smaller audience. For ideas and resources related to selecting topics and speakers, see Chapter 19, Section 6 (page 89) of this toolkit.
- Sermon Starters, RAC Guides.
- Sample sermon: “In the Shadows of Sandy Hook,” Rabbi David A. Lipper, Shabbat Vayigash, December 21, 2012.¹²

⁹ <https://bit.ly/faced-with-gun-violence>.

¹⁰ <https://bit.ly/as-we-begin>.

¹¹ See also “Resources for Engaging in the National Vigil and December Sabbath,” Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence, Dec. 2019, <http://faiths-united.org/resources-for-engaging-in-the-national-vigil-and-december-sabbath>. Scroll down to the section for Judaism (note some links are broken).

¹² <https://rac.org/sample-sermon-gun-violence-sermon-rabbi-david-lipper>.

- Sample sermon: “Run, Hide, Fight (Is Not a Plan),” Rabbi Joel M. Mosbacher, Senior Rabbi, Temple Shaaray Tefila, New York City, May 31, 2022.¹³

For additional suggestions, contact Steve Klitzman, Temple Sinai GVP Group,
steve.klitzman@gmail.com.

Photo: Middle Street Synagogue, Brighton, May 5, 2013, public domain (CC0).

¹³ <https://shaaraytefilanyc.org/article/rabbi-mosbacher-run-hide-fight>.



Chapter 11. Protestant Prayer Service¹

Opening Prayer (Officiant)

O God who Remembers, we hold before you all who have died from the plague of gun violence in our land. We remember those who have taken their lives with a gun, those who have died in school shootings and mass shootings, those who have died by a gun in the course of an argument or from abuse or by accident or during the commission of a crime.

We lift our voices in sorrow and frustration knowing that every life is infinitely valuable to you. Receive all who have died into the arms of your mercy, bless those who mourn with the hope of eternal life, and strengthen our hearts and our arms to bring an end to this scourge. This we pray in the name of the one who overcame the power of death, your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Community Prayer (said in unison)

Healing and Holy God, we gather today in common grief for the epidemic of gun violence. Be with all those who suffer from the lasting trauma that incidents of gun violence leave in their wake. Grant us strength and courage to live in hope of a better day, our minds fixed on the doing of your will, so that we, having been delivered from fear, may live in peace. All this we ask through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Song: O Lord, Hear My Prayer (Taizé Community, J. Berthier) (repeat 6 times)

O Lord, hear my prayer
O Lord, hear my prayer
When I call, answer me

¹ Sources: Bishops United Against Gun Violence, Liturgical Resources, <https://bishopsagainstgunviolence.org/resources/liturgical-resources>; "Service of Prayer and Lament in Times of Violence," Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Service_of_Prayer-in_Times_of_Violence.pdf.

O Lord, hear my prayer
O Lord, hear my prayer
Come and listen to me.

Scripture Readings²

Isaiah 2:2-4

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Psalms 23 (KJV)

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it

² Other possibilities include Mic. 6:6-8, Ps. 13, Rom. 8:31-39, Eph. 4:25-5:2, and Luke 4:14-21.

is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Silent Meditation

Lament (Officiant; people respond)

For all victims of violence, and particularly for those affected by the recent shooting in _____, we pray to You, O Lord: *Lord, hear our prayer.*

For those who have been injured, that they might know your healing power, we pray to You, O Lord: *Lord, hear our prayer.*

For those who are afraid, that they may know Your perfect love which casts out fear, we pray to You, O Lord: *Lord, hear our prayer.*

For those who mourn, that they may be comforted in their distress, we pray to You, O Lord: *Lord, hear our prayer.*

For all who have died, that they may be received into the arms of Your mercy, we pray to You, O Lord: *Lord, hear our prayer.*

For the first responders, caregivers, and all who work to protect, heal, and restore, we pray to You, O Lord: *Lord, hear our prayer.*

For those in authority, both in the Church and in government, that they might lead us in the way of justice and peace, we pray to You, O Lord: *Lord, hear our prayer.*

That the world may be free of violence, racism, poverty, and oppression, we pray to You, O Lord: *Lord, hear our prayer.*

That our divisions may cease, and all may be one in You, we pray to You, O Lord: *Lord, hear our prayer.*

That we may not repay evil for evil, but find grace to forgive, we pray to You, O Lord: *Lord, hear our prayer.*

That all people might be united in the work of Your Kingdom, we pray to You, O Lord: *Lord, hear our prayer.*

We ask Your forgiveness for the ways in which we have contributed to the violence in the world. *Lord, hear our prayer.*

We ask Your forgiveness for any harm we have done to one another. *Lord, hear our prayer.*

We ask Your forgiveness for any prejudice, bitterness, or hate we harbor in our hearts. *Lord, hear our prayer.*

We ask Your forgiveness for any ill we have wished upon one another. *Lord, hear our prayer.*

We ask Your forgiveness for the times when we have been slow to forgive. *Lord, hear our prayer.*

We ask Your forgiveness for all we do, think, and say which falls short of Your command to us to love one another. *Lord, hear our prayer.*

For ourselves, for the forgiveness of our sins, and for the grace of the Holy Spirit to amend our lives, we pray to you, O Lord: *Lord, hear our Prayer.*

O Lord, we remember before you all those whose lives have been ended or shattered by gun violence. We give you thanks for the witness here at this gathering today. We pray that this country may wake up to the horror of gun violence and work toward peace and freedom from fear. All this we ask in and through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who has taught us to pray:

Lord's Prayer (said in unison)

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Blessing (Officiant)

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ, our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always. Amen.

Closing Hymn: O God, Our Help in Ages Past

Photo of interior of church, public domain (CC0).



Chapter 12. Catholic Prayer Service to End Gun Violence¹

Greeting/Welcome

We gather on this National Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath Weekend to mark the ___th anniversary of the tragic school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, on December 14, 2012, and to pray for an end to gun violence in our country.

We remember especially today all the victims of gun violence and their families, including those killed in _____ of the many mass shootings this year [or other timeframe]: [list of mass shootings by number killed, location, month, and year].²

And we implore the intercession of Mary for the protection of our nation's families under her titles of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Patroness of the Americas, and Our Lady Queen of Peace.

Rosary for Victims of Gun Violence and Their Families

[Recite the Apostles Creed, the Our Father, three Hail Marys, and the Glory Be.]

Let us pray for the ___ shooting victims of [first location].³ Our Father . . .

For [name], age __, and [his/her] family, Hail Mary . . .

[Continue with additional names for the remaining nine Hail Marys. Conclude decade with the Glory Be.]

[Continue with additional locations and names for four more decades.]

¹ Assign roles and recruit volunteers to serve as prayer leaders, lectors, etc.

² Pick events with a combined total of at least 50 victims (one per Hail Mary). If there are more than 50 victims total, some can be doubled up.

³ The list of mass shootings takes the place of the usual mysteries of the rosary, with each decade dedicated to one or more mass shootings, depending on the number of victims. Illustrative program available at <https://bit.ly/Catholic-prayer-service>.

Hail, Holy Queen . . .

Scripture Readings⁴

Habakkuk 1:2-4, 2:2-3

How long, O Lord, must I cry for help and you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, "Violence!" and you do not intervene?
Why do you let me see iniquity? Why do you simply gaze at evil?
Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife and discord.
This is why the law is numb and justice never comes,
For the wicked surround the just; this is why justice comes forth perverted.
Then the Lord answered me and said: "Write down the vision;
Make it plain upon tablets, so that the one who reads it may run.
For the vision is a witness for the appointed time,
a testimony to the end; it will not disappoint.
If it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late."

Psalms 27:1-5, 13-14

R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.
The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear?
The Lord is my life's refuge; of whom should I be afraid?
R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.
When evildoers come at me to devour my flesh,
My foes and my enemies themselves stumble and fall.
Though an army encamp against me, my heart will not fear;
Though war be waged upon me, even then will I trust.
R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.
One thing I ask of the Lord; this I seek:
To dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
That I may gaze on the loveliness of the Lord and contemplate his temple.
R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.
For God will hide me in his shelter in time of trouble,
He will conceal me in the cover of his tent and set me high upon a rock.
R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.
I believe that I shall see the bounty of the Lord in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord with courage; be stouthearted, and wait for the Lord.
R. The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Revelation 21:1-5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.
The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

⁴ These are suggestions; other possibilities include Isa. 2:2-5, 11:6-9; Ps. 23; Matt. 5:1-12, 26:47-52.

I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,
prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.
I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race.
He will dwell with them and they will be his people
and God himself will always be with them [as their God].
He will wipe every tear from their eyes,
and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain,
[for] the old order has passed away."
The one who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new."

Silent Reflection

General Intercessions⁵

R. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Litany for the Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath⁶

A: Giver of Life and Love, you created all people as one family and called us to live together in harmony and peace. Surround us with your love as we face the challenges and tragedies of gun violence.

B: We pray for the victims of gun violence, the more than 40,000 who die each year from homicide, suicide, and accidental shootings; those wounded and suffering; and the family members and friends grieving the loss of loved ones and caring for survivors.

A: We pray for first responders, whose duties bring them to the homes, the streets, the lobbies, the schools, and the malls where the carnage of gun violence takes place day after day. Give them sound judgment and compassion as they rush to aid others.

B: We pray for our civic leaders, legislators, and judges who bear the responsibility to promote the common good. Give them wisdom to discern what is right and courage to act in the face of powerful political forces.

A: God of Justice, help us, your church, find our voice. Empower us to protest the needless deaths caused by gun violence and to advocate for effective change.

All: All this we pray in the name of the One who offered his life so that we might live, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Greeting of Peace

May the peace of the Lord be with you always.

R. And with your spirit.

Let us offer each other a sign of peace.

⁵ Invite members of the congregation to offer their petitions aloud.

⁶ This prayer concludes the intercessions. A and B indicate alternating sides of the center aisle. Adapted from a prayer by the Rt. Rev. Stephen T. Lane, Episcopal Bishop of Maine (2015).

Closing Prayer

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, let us go forth from this holy place and become instruments of peace to all whom we encounter from this day forward. Amen.

Closing Song: “Prayer of Peace”⁷

1. Peace before us, peace behind us, peace under our feet.
Peace within us, peace over us, let all around us be peace.
2. Love before us, love behind us, love under our feet.
Love within us, love over us, let all around us be love.
3. Light before us, light behind us, light under our feet.
Light within us, light over us, let all around us be light.

Photo: Rosary on Bible, public domain (CC0).

⁷ “Prayer for Peace (Peace Before Us)” by David Haas, sung by Chris Brunelle, April 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYFnLIs5p4M>.



Chapter 13. Unitarian Universalist Healing Service¹

Opening Music upon entry

Video, “Hymn of Healing” by Beautiful Chorus²

Minister’s Greeting

Welcome to the space

Chalice Lighting

Pastoral Care Team Member 1: On behalf of the Pastoral Care Team, I welcome you to our Healing Service. As our chalice is lit this evening, I offer the words of Rev. Maureen Killoran:

As the kindling of this chalice calls us to community,
Let there be light.
As the flame of this chalice reminds us of our values,
Let there be light.
As the glow of this chalice encourages us to hope,
Let there be light.

Invocation

Pastoral Care Team Member 2: Good evening. I offer these words of invocation by Rev. Angela Herrera:

Don’t leave your broken heart at the door;
bring it to the altar of life.
Don’t leave your anger behind;
it has high standards
and the world needs vision.
Bring them with you,
and your joy
and your passion.
Bring your loving,
and your courage

¹ Based on Healing Service, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fairfax, Feb. 12, 2021.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hblu7sSmsDw>.

and your conviction.
Bring your need for healing,
and your power to heal.
There is work to do
and you have all that you need to do it
right here in this room.

Music

Video, “Sanctuary” by Randy Rothwell, adapted by The Sanctuary Boston:³

Make us aware
We
Are a sanctuary
Each made holy
And loved right through
With thanksgiving
We are living
Sanctuary Anew

Spoken Meditation

[Minister offers a meditation suited to the occasion and recent situations of violence]

Poem

Video: “Being Human” by Naima Penniman⁴

Invitation into Ritual

Music: Video, “River Flows in You” by Yiruma⁵

Prayer

[Minister offers concluding prayer]

Closing Song

Video: “Gentle with Myself” by Karen Drucker⁶

Thank You

Pastoral Care Team Member 3: On behalf of the entire Pastoral Care Team, I would like to thank you for attending this year’s Healing Service.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zin7Lt8EAJw>.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdMHqjN4Wtw>. Words available at <https://alearningaday.blog/2022/07/19/being-human-by-naima-penniman>.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fiBvOKmuWKg>.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s62ZFr0SOj4>.

Chalice Extinguishing

Pastoral Care Team Member 4: As we extinguish our chalice this evening, I offer the words of Elizabeth Lesser:

These are such challenging times, with so much unknown before us. The best way forward is to let ourselves mourn what has been lost, to feel our very human vulnerability, to be kind and gentle and patient with ourselves and others, so that when the time comes, we can welcome the new, unexplored areas of life.

I feel lighter and stronger having allowed myself to rest in the soft places of my heart, to surrender to loss, to grieve. It's one of life's great mysteries how grief is a steppingstone out of the mind-maze and into a bigger, brighter world.

Benediction

[Minister concludes the service with a benediction]

Photo: Sanctuary of First Unitarian Church of Rochester, by Whywhynot, Aug. 31, 2011, licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).



Chapter 14. Hindu Prayer

Om

In Hinduism, *Om* is the symbol of peace, tranquility, and unity, of Good versus Evil. The Chandogya Upanishad states that gods took the *Udgitha* (song of *Om*) unto themselves, thinking, “with this song we shall overcome the demons” (verse 1.2.1). The syllable *Om* is thus implied as that which inspires the good inclinations within each person.¹ Therefore, *Om*, the most sacred symbol of Hinduism, is one of peace, tranquility, and unity.

Yoga and Meditation

Om is used in yoga and meditation because the sound and the vibrations it makes helps to calm the mind and body. Since *Om* signifies unity, the sound chanted in unison with others brings those together in harmony.

Chanting helps align the body, mind, and the soul, leading to a stronger, peaceful connection to oneself through introspection and meditation.

There are many health benefits to chanting *Om* every day. These include reducing stress levels, improving concentration, regulating your sleep cycle, letting go of negativity, and feeling more energized and invigorated.

Chanting *Om Shanti Om*

Shanti translates to peaceful, nonviolent, calm, or undisturbed. It denotes abstention from mental and physical violence and disturbances. It is a virtue under which some sentiment is to

¹ Max Muller, Chandogya Upanishad, *The Upanishads*, Part I, Oxford University Press, pages 4-6 with footnotes.

be removed from the mind instead of generating some sentiment in the mind. It is to bring the refusal of violent feelings from mind and violent activities from the life.²

The belief that God (Ishwar) is everywhere creates the attitude of sublime tolerance and acceptance toward others. All living beings are the same and are from the same God, so there should be a sense of equality and one should not harm or hurt others. For a peaceful coexistence, the Vedas visualize the key principles of synthesis and balance. The concept of *shanti* is established on these principles. Peace as a highest human value is interlinked with other values such as truth, nonviolence, purity, friendliness, forgiveness, and tolerance, and a peaceful attitude is regarded as the foundation of all morality.³

Om Shanti Om can be translated as universal peace.

A Vedic Prayer

May there be peace in the heavens,
Peace in the atmosphere, peace on earth.
Let there be coolness in water, healing in the herbs,
And peace radiating from trees.
Let there be harmony in the planets, and in the stars,
And perfection in eternal knowledge!
May everything in the universe be at peace!
Let peace pervade everywhere at all times!
May I experience that peace with my own heart.⁴

Gayatri Manoharan
Moms Demand Action, Burke-Fairfax, VA

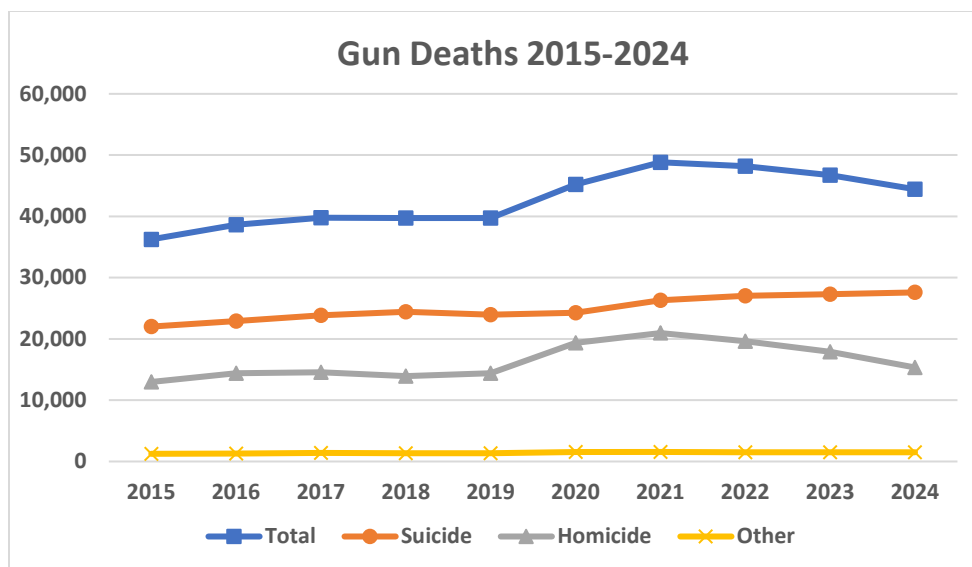
Image: Om symbol, public domain (CC0).

² Shashi Tiwari, "Concept of Peace in Hinduism," Sept. 1, 2015, <https://vedicwaves.wordpress.com/2015/09/05/new-blog>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ YajurVed, 36:17. Muhammed Anjum, "Concept of Peace in World's Major Religions: An Analysis." *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, Volume 7, Issue 4, April 2017, 248 ISSN 2250-3153.

Facts about Gun Violence and Gun Laws in the United States



Chapter 15. Gun Violence in the United States: 11 Key Facts

Gun Deaths: Total gun deaths in the United States in 2024 (the most recent year for which complete data are available) declined almost 5 percent from the year before to 44,447. This is still 23 percent higher than the number of gun deaths ten years earlier, 36,252.¹

Homicides: Gun homicides in 2024 declined 14 percent from the year before to 15,364, representing 76 percent of all homicides (20,162) and 35 percent of all gun deaths. This is 18 percent higher than the number of gun homicides ten years earlier, 12,979.

Suicides: Gun suicides in 2024 increased 1 percent from the year before to 27,593, representing 57 percent of all suicides (48,824) and 62 percent of all gun deaths. This is 25 percent higher than the number of gun suicides ten years earlier, 22,018.

Injuries: In 2024, 168,093 people suffered non-fatal gun injuries in the United States, 3.8 times the number of gun deaths that year (44,447).² Gun injuries inflict terrible damage, with long-term physical and mental health consequences for many of the injured. For each person shot, many others are deeply affected, including witnesses to the shooting and family members and friends of the victim.

¹ Statistics for total gun deaths, homicides, and suicides through 2024 are taken from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), <https://wisqars.cdc.gov/fatal-reports>, and Wide-ranging Online Data for Epidemiologic Research (WONDER) system, <https://wonder.cdc.gov/ucd-icd10-expanded.html>. "Other" gun deaths (as shown in the chart) include unintentional deaths, deaths that involved law enforcement, and deaths whose circumstances could not be determined. See also John Gramlich, "What the Data Says about Gun Deaths in the U.S.," Pew Research Center, Feb. 3, 2022, <https://pewrsr.ch/3opljwS>. As of Sept. 7, 2025, provisional CDC data for 2025 show a 5 percent decrease in total gun deaths, to 42,350, including 12,857 homicides (down 16 percent), 28,062 suicides (up 2 percent), and 1,431 other deaths (down 4 percent), <http://wonder.cdc.gov/mcd-icd10-provisional.html>.

² CDC Nonfatal Injury Reports, WISQARS, <https://wisqars.cdc.gov/nonfatal-reports>. Data for 2025 are not yet available.

Economic Cost: The total annual bill for taxpayers, survivors, families, employers, and communities is \$557 billion, which includes short-term costs (e.g., police and emergency medical care) and long-term costs (e.g., long-term medical care and lost productivity).³

Assault Rifles: There are an estimated 30 million assault rifles in the United States.⁴ Assault rifles such as the AR-15 are often used in mass shootings and inflict battlefield-level casualties.⁵

Mass Shootings: The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported 24 active shooter incidents in 2024, including 3 mass killings.⁶ This very low number results from the FBI's use of a narrow definition (three or more people killed, excluding the shooter, by a stranger in a public place) that excludes the great majority of shooting incidents involving multiple victims. By contrast, the Gun Violence Archives identified 503 mass shootings that same year, using a broader definition (four or more people killed or wounded by gun, excluding the shooter, regardless of location).⁷

Gun Violence and Children/Teens: Firearms are the leading cause of death for children and teens (ages 0-19) in the United States. Annually, more than 4,400 children and teens in the United States are shot and killed and another 17,000 are wounded.⁸

Gun Violence and Black Youth: In 2023, the firearm homicide rate for Black boys and men between the ages of 10 and 24 in the United States was 10 times higher than for Whites in the same age group, according to CDC data.⁹

Gun Violence and Women: Women in the United States are 28 times more likely to be killed by guns than women in other high-income countries. On average, 70 women are shot and killed by an intimate partner every month. Nearly 6 million women in the United States reported having had a gun used on them by an intimate partner, including being shot or shot at, hit with, or threatened with a gun.¹⁰

³ "The Economic Cost of Gun Violence," Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, July 19, 2022, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/the-economic-cost-of-gun-violence>.

⁴ Chris Eger, "Americans Have Over 30 Million AR-15s, AKs, etc. in Circulation," Feb. 18, 2025, <https://www.guns.com/news/2025/02/18/americans-have-over-30-million-ar-15s-aks-etc-in-circulation>.

⁵ Peter Lucier, "Dumb About Guns? An Ex-Marine Answers Your Questions," Mar. 2, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/dumb-about-guns-an-ex-marine-answers-your-questions>.

⁶ "Active Shooter Incidents in the United States in 2024," <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/reports-and-publications/2024-active-shooter-report/view>. The FBI reported 48 active shooter incidents in 2023, including 15 mass killings, <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/2023-active-shooter-report-062124.pdf/view>.

⁷ "Mass Shootings in 2023," Gun Violence Archives, <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting?year=2024>. The latter expanded definition of mass shootings is now being used by much of the media and by gun violence experts and organizations fighting the scourge of gun violence. The Gun Violence Archive lists 659 mass shootings in 2023, <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting?year=2023>.

⁸ Everytown for Gun Safety, "The Impact of Gun Violence on Children and Teens," Jan. 16, 2026, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/the-impact-of-gun-violence-on-children-and-teens>.

⁹ CDC WONDER Online Database, <http://wonder.cdc.gov/ucd-icd10-expanded.html>.

¹⁰ Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, "Guns and Violence Against Women," Mar. 18, 2026, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/guns-and-violence-against-women-americas-uniquely-lethal-intimate-partner-violence-problem>.



Chapter 16. Overview of Gun Violence and Gun Laws in the United States¹

Gun violence takes an enormous toll on our country. Over 160,000 Americans have been shot in each of the last three years for which data are available, including over 44,000 killed by guns.² In 2024, total homicides declined by 12 percent from the year before, to 20,162; 76 percent of those were firearm homicides (15,364).³ Total suicides that year declined only slightly, to 48,824; 57 percent of those were firearm suicides (27,593).⁴

Gun injuries are often ignored by the media, but in the last few years they have exceeded gun deaths by three to four times.⁵ In 2024, there were over 168,000 non-fatal firearm injuries in the United States, according to the CDC.⁶ Gun injuries inflict terrible damage, with long-term physical and mental health consequences for many of the injured. The National Spinal Cord Injury Statistical Center estimates that as many as 45,000 Americans have been paralyzed from gunshot wounds.⁷

¹ This chapter expands upon the 11 key facts provided in Chapter 15 and adds other relevant information.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Wide-ranging Online Data for Epidemiologic Research (WONDER) system, <https://wonder.cdc.gov/ucd-icd10-expanded.html>, data for 2022-2024.

³ CDC WONDER system. Total homicides increased each year from 2018 to 2021, by a total of 37 percent. They decreased each year from 2021 to 2024, by a total of 22 percent.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ CDC Nonfatal Injury Reports, WISQARS, <https://wisqars.cdc.gov/nonfatal-reports>, data for 2022-2024.

⁶ Ibid. The CDC figure for non-fatal gun injuries in 2024 (168,093) is 3.8 times more than the number of gun deaths that year (44,447).

⁷ David Gambacorta and Helen Ubiñas, "Shot and Forgotten: America's Hidden Toll of Gun Violence," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Nov. 28, 2018, <https://www.inquirer.com/news/ing/gun-violence-philadelphia-shooting-victims-columbine-wheelchair-jalil-frazier-ralph-brooks-20181128.html>; Lisa Robinson, "Gun Violence Often Leads to Spinal Cord Injuries in Baltimore," *WBALTV*, Oct. 30, 2015, <https://www.wbalTV.com/article/gun-violence-often-leads-to-spinal-cord-injuries-in-baltimore/7096840>.

The repercussions of gun violence go far beyond just the deaths. Consider the Las Vegas shooting in October 2017, which was the worst mass shooting in modern U.S. history. Victims included 58 people killed, 867 injured (441 by gunfire and the rest in the stampede of people running for their lives), family members and friends of those killed and wounded, and more than 22,000 people in attendance at the country music festival who experienced this traumatic event, many of whom likely suffer from some form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Focusing only on the 58 people who died in the Las Vegas shooting does not begin to capture the horror and damage inflicted by that event.

Overall, U.S. states with the highest rates of gun ownership and weak gun safety laws have the highest rates of gun deaths, while states with the lowest rates of gun ownership and strong gun safety laws have the lowest rates of gun deaths.⁸

Guns in the United States

According to one estimate, there are currently about 500 million civilian-owned guns in the United States, about 1.5 guns per person, nearly 2 guns per adult.⁹ The exact count is unknown because there is no required federal or state registry of guns.¹⁰ The United States has more guns per capita than any other country in the world (120 guns per 100 people in 2017, more than four times the rate of other high-income countries), and the U.S. gun homicide rate is 25 times higher than other high-income countries.¹¹ Statistically, guns clearly do not make Americans safe.

Gun sales in the United States reached a record level in 2020, with 23 million guns sold, a 65 percent increase compared to 2019, when 13.9 million guns were sold, according to Small Arms Analytics.¹² Another 20 million guns were sold in 2021, about 17 million each in 2022 and 2023, and about 16 million in 2024.¹³ Americans are in an arms race with themselves.

⁸ "States with Weaker Gun Laws and Higher Gun Ownership Have Highest Gun Death Rates, New 2024 Data Confirm," Violence Policy Center, Feb. 26, 2026, <https://vpc.org/press/states-with-weaker-gun-laws-and-higher-gun-ownership-have-highest-gun-death-rates-new-2024-data-confirm>; "Gun Safety Policies Save Lives," Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, 2026, <https://everytownresearch.org/rankings>.

⁹ Cassandra McBride, "How Many Guns in the U.S.: All About America's Firearms in 2026," Mar. 2, 2026, <https://ammo.com/articles/how-many-guns-in-the-us>.

¹⁰ "Registration," Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/owner-responsibilities/registration/>.

¹¹ "Gun Ownership by Country 2026," World Population Review, undated, based on 2017 data, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/gun-ownership-by-country>; Erin Grinshteyn and David Hemenway, "Violent Death Rates: The US Compared with Other High-income OECD Countries, 2010," *The American Journal of Medicine*, Nov. 6, 2015, [https://www.amjmed.com/article/S0002-9343\(15\)01030-X/fulltext](https://www.amjmed.com/article/S0002-9343(15)01030-X/fulltext).

¹² Martin Savidge and Maria Cartaya, "Americans Bought Guns in Record Numbers in 2020 During a Year of Unrest—and the Surge Is Continuing," *CNN*, Mar. 14, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/14/us/us-gun-sales-record/index.html>.

¹³ Rob Gabriele, "Gun Sales in the U.S.: 2025 Statistics," June 4, 2025, <https://www.safehome.org/data/firearms-guns-statistics>.

Assault Rifles and Ghost Guns

Assault rifles in use by civilians are mostly semi-automatic: a bullet is automatically loaded into the chamber after the previous round is fired (until the magazine is empty), but the shooter must pull the trigger for each shot. Automatic assault rifles (e.g., machine guns), which fire continuously until the trigger is released, are strictly regulated but in circulation. Starting in 2019, accessories like “bump stocks” that turn a semi-automatic weapon into an automatic weapon have been banned.¹⁴ Yet so-called “ghost guns” (having no serial numbers for tracing) can also be turned into automatic weapons relatively easily, and they are starting to turn up at crime scenes. The federal government, ten states, and the District of Columbia have placed restrictions on undetectable or untraceable guns.¹⁵

There are an estimated 30 million assault rifles in the United States.¹⁶ The civilian AR-15 assault rifle—the most popular assault rifle in the United States—is modeled after the military M16 rifle, which was designed in the 1960s for the Vietnam War. It has been used in many mass shootings. The shooter in Dayton, Ohio, in August 2019 used an AR-15 to fire 41 rounds in 32 seconds, killing 9 people and injuring 17 outside a bar. He still had dozens of bullets in his 100-round magazine when he was killed by police.¹⁷ A U.S. Marine noted, “The bullet from an AR-15 is designed to cause massive damage to flesh. We are now seeing battlefield-level casualties on the streets of America.”¹⁸

Economic Cost of Gun Violence

Harvard Medical School researchers have found that gun violence costs the United States some \$557 billion annually, or 2.6% of gross domestic product, according to a peer-reviewed study published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*. The majority of that cost is attributed to quality-of-life losses among those injured by firearms and their families.¹⁹

“Employers and their health insurers sustain a substantial financial burden from firearm injuries and have a financial incentive to prevent them,” lead researcher Zirui Song said in a statement.

¹⁴ “Bump Stocks,” Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Sept. 23, 2022, <https://www.atf.gov/rules-and-regulations/bump-stocks>.

¹⁵ “Ghost Guns,” Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/hardware-ammunition/ghost-guns>.

¹⁶ Chris Eger, “Americans Have Over 30 Million AR-15s, AKs, etc. in Circulation,” Feb. 18, 2025, <https://www.guns.com/news/2025/02/18/americans-have-over-30-million-ar-15s-aks-etc-in-circulation>.

¹⁷ Griff Witte, “As Mass Shootings Rise, Experts Say High-Capacity Magazines Should Be the Focus,” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 18, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/as-mass-shootings-rise-experts-say-high-capacity-magazines-should-be-the-focus/2019/08/18/d016fa66-bfa3-11e9-a5c6-1e74f7ec4a93_story.html.

¹⁸ Peter Lucier, “Dumb About Guns? An Ex-Marine Answers Your Questions,” *Daily Beast*, Mar. 2, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/dumb-about-guns-an-ex-marine-answers-your-questions>.

¹⁹ Dennis Nealon, “The Business Case For Reducing Gun Violence,” Harvard Medical School News and Research, Sept. 27, 2022, <https://hms.harvard.edu/news/business-case-reducing-gun-violence>; “The Economic Cost of Gun Violence,” Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, July 19, 2022, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/the-economic-cost-of-gun-violence>.

“However, U.S. businesses have by and large not engaged publicly on the subject of firearms, despite spending large sums on other efforts to promote employee health.”

Gun Industry in United States Is Not Subject to Liability or the Federal Consumer Protection Act

The Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act (PLCAA), signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2005, shields the gun industry from nearly all civil liability for the dangers their products pose. No other industry has such blanket immunity.²⁰ In addition, guns were exempted from safety regulations by the federal Consumer Protection Act, which passed in 1972. Cars, toys, and aspirin have to meet mandatory safety standards; guns do not.²¹

Mass Shootings

There are various definitions of a mass shooting in the United States. The FBI defines a mass shooting as three or more people killed, excluding the shooter, by a stranger in a public place.²² This definition ignores gun injuries and mass shootings associated with domestic violence, and gang and drug violence where the people shot often know the shooter.

A more frequently used definition by the Gun Violence Archives (GVA) counts as a mass shooting any shooting with four or more people killed *or wounded* by guns, excluding the shooter. According to this definition, there were 503 mass shootings in 2024, nearly 10 per week.²³ A total of 510 people were killed and 2,201 injured in those incidents. Much of the media and gun violence experts and advocacy organizations now use this definition of mass shootings. Even with the expanded definition, mass shootings account for a small—though not insignificant—percentage of the total incidents of gun violence in the United States.

School Shootings

According to *Education Week*, there have been 244 school shootings in the United States since 2018, including 51 in 2022, 38 in 2023, 39 in 2024, and 18 in 2025.²⁴ *The Wall Street Journal* found that, of 20 school shootings it reviewed, the guns used were acquired mostly from the

²⁰ “Gun Industry Immunity,” Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/other-laws-policies/gun-industry-immunity>.

²¹ Olivia Li, “Cars, Toys, and Aspirin Have to Meet Mandatory Safety Standards. Guns Don’t. Here’s Why.” *The Trace*, Jan. 19, 2016, <https://www.thetrace.org/2016/01/gun-safety-standards>.

²² “Active Shooter Incidents in the United States in 2024,” <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/reports-and-publications/2024-active-shooter-report/view>.

²³ “Mass Shootings in 2023,” Gun Violence Archives, <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting?year=2024>. Everytown for Gun Safety now uses the same definition, <https://everytownresearch.org/mass-shootings-in-america>.

²⁴ “School Shootings This Year: How Many and Where,” *Education Week*, Jan. 1, 2026, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/school-shootings-over-time-incidents-injuries-and-deaths>.

shooter's home.²⁵ An estimated three million children in the United States are exposed to shootings every year (at school and in their communities).²⁶

Homicide and Suicide

As noted above, total homicides in 2024 declined 12 percent from 2023, to 20,162. Seventy-six percent of those were firearm homicides (15,364).²⁷

Total suicides declined 1 percent in 2024 to 48,824. Fifty-seven percent of those were firearm suicides (27,593).²⁸

Accidental Shootings

Each year, nearly 500 people die from accidental shootings in the United States, mostly in homes, and some tragically committed by children as young as two years old. Unintentional firearm injuries account for 37 percent of nonfatal firearm injuries but only 1 percent of all gun deaths.²⁹

Gun Laws in the United States—Current Trend Toward Easy Access and Limited Regulation

Permitless Concealed Carry: Twenty-nine states currently allow permitless concealed carry.³⁰ Permitless carry means that someone can carry a concealed gun in public without a permit, license, or any safety training.

Open Carry: Four states (California, Connecticut, Florida, and Illinois) and the District of Columbia generally prohibit people from openly carrying firearms in public. The other 46 states allow the open carry of handguns (44 states), long rifles/assault weapons (46 states), or both (44 states); 5 states require a permit or license to do so.³¹ Open carry has become a serious problem, with frequent incidents of armed individuals intimidating people at protests or voting locations, and legislators inside state capitals.

Guns in Schools: As of January 1, 2025, at least 29 states allow schools to arm teachers or staff in at least some situations.³²

²⁵ Tawnell D. Hobbs, "Most Guns Used in School Shootings Come From Home," *The Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 5, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-school-shootings-most-guns-come-from-home-1522920600>.

²⁶ "Gunfire on School Grounds in the United States," Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, May 15, 2024, <https://everytownresearch.org/maps/gunfire-on-school-grounds>.

²⁷ CDC WONDER system data through 2024.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ "Unintentional Shootings," Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, Feb. 2021, <https://efsgv.org/learn/type-of-gun-violence/unintentional-shootings>; CDC WONDER system data through 2023.

³⁰ "Concealed Carry," Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/guns-in-public/concealed-carry>.

³¹ "Open Carry," Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/guns-in-public/open-carry>.

³² "The Effects of Laws Allowing Armed Staff in K–12 Schools," Rand Corporation, Gun Policy in America, Jan. 29, 2026, <https://www.rand.org/research/gun-policy/analysis/laws-allowing-armed-staff-in-K12-schools.html>.

Stand Your Ground: Twenty-seven states now have Stand Your Ground laws, and another seven states apply Stand Your Ground through case law or jury instructions.³³ Without such laws, a person being threatened with personal injury has a duty to retreat to avoid the harm, if possible, rather than using force in self-defense; in Stand Your Ground states, there is no such duty.

Background Checks: Only 19 states and the District of Columbia have “universal” background check laws requiring background checks for all firearm purchases. Dangerous gaps in federal gun laws allow people in the other 31 states to buy guns online, at gun shows, or through unlicensed dealers without a background check. An estimated 22 percent of U.S. gun owners acquired firearms without a background check, including individuals who are prohibited from owning firearms due to convictions for domestic violence or other violent crimes or who are ineligible due to mental health reasons.³⁴

Licensing: Only 14 states and the District of Columbia require some type of license or permit for firearms, ranging from a permit to purchase, a license to own, or a requirement to simply register firearms. Two other states require a firearms safety certificate.³⁵ Five of the 14 states with licensing requirements do not require any safety training as part of the licensing or permitting process. The remaining 36 states require no license or permit to purchase or own a firearm.

Safe Storage of Guns in Homes (and Cars): Twenty-six states and the District of Columbia have child access prevention or other safe storage laws, though the terms vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Only six states require that firearms be stored and locked whenever the firearm is not under the owner’s or possessor’s immediate control. Hundreds of thousands of guns are stolen from homes, cars, and poorly secured gun stores every year and often used in crimes.³⁶

Select Populations Affected by Gun Violence: Youth, Women, and African Americans

Gun Violence and Children/Teens: Firearms are the leading cause of death for children and teens (0-19) in the United States. More children and teens in the United States die by firearms

³³ “States with Stand Your Ground Laws 2026,” World Population Review, undated, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/states-with-stand-your-ground-laws>.

³⁴ “Universal Background Checks,” Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/background-checks/universal-background-checks>. The 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act and a 2024 implementing regulation from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives significantly expanded the category of gun sellers required to obtain a federal license and conduct background checks. In May 2024, a district court in Texas issued a preliminary injunction blocking enforcement of the rule pending further litigation. “Final Rule: Definition of ‘Engaged in the Business’ as a Dealer in Firearms,” <https://www.atf.gov/rules-and-regulations/final-rule-definition-engaged-business-a-dealer-firearms>.

³⁵ “Licensing,” Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/owner-responsibilities/licensing>.

³⁶ “Child Access Prevention and Safe Storage,” Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/child-consumer-safety/safe-storage>.

than by car accidents or cancer. On average, more than 4,400 youth in the United States are shot and killed annually, and another 17,000 are wounded.³⁷

Gun Violence and Black Youth: In 2023, the firearm homicide rate for Black boys and men between the ages of 10 and 24 in the United States was 10 times higher than for Whites in the same age group, according to CDC data.³⁸

Gun Violence and Women: Women in the United States are 28 times more likely to be killed by guns than women in other high-income countries. On average, 70 women are shot and killed by their intimate partner every month. Nearly 6 million women in the United States reported having had a gun used on them by an intimate partner, including being shot or shot at, hit with, or threatened with a gun.³⁹

Some Progress on Gun Safety and Good Gun Laws

Since the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012, states have enacted more than 820 gun safety laws.⁴⁰ Notably in Connecticut, the state

- passed universal background checks;
- expanded the state assault weapons ban;
- prohibited people under domestic violence restraining orders from accessing guns;
- outlawed the sale of high-capacity ammunition magazines;
- started youth violence prevention programs; and
- instituted gun buyback programs.

By 2019, gun violence levels in Connecticut had dropped to the lowest level in years.⁴¹

Colorado succeeded in passing five gun safety laws in 2021, after the mass shooting at a grocery store in Boulder:

- mandatory safe storage of firearms in the home, if children or someone prohibited from possessing a firearm due to mental illness or a felony conviction is in the home;
- mandatory reporting of the loss or theft of a firearm, which will help deter illegal gun trafficking;
- a ban on people with certain violent misdemeanors from buying a firearm for five years, including convictions for child abuse, domestic violence, and sexual assault;

³⁷ "The Impact of Gun Violence on Children and Teens," Everytown for Gun Safety, Jan. 16, 2026, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/the-impact-of-gun-violence-on-children-and-teens>.

³⁸ CDC WONDER Online Database, <http://wonder.cdc.gov/ucd-icd10-expanded.html>.

³⁹ "Guns and Violence Against Women," Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, Mar. 18, 2026, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/guns-and-violence-against-women-americas-uniquely-lethal-intimate-partner-violence-problem>.

⁴⁰ "Gun Law Trendwatch: 2025 Year-End Review," Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated, <https://giffords.org/analysis/gun-law-trendwatch-2025-year-end-review>.

⁴¹ Cassidy McDonald, "Police Chief Says Connecticut Is a 'Model' for Gun Laws after Sandy Hook Shooting Prompted Reform," *CBS News*, Mar. 24, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/gun-control-laws-connecticut-sandy-hook-shooting>.

- allowing cities to pass stricter gun laws in the state (Boulder’s ban on assault weapons had been overturned 10 days before the mass shooting); and
- establishing an office of gun violence prevention.⁴²

In 2025, state legislators in 33 states passed 89 strong gun safety bills, including bills to strengthen background check requirements, fund proven community violence intervention programs, improve domestic violence prohibitions, regulate or prohibit particularly dangerous weapons, and hold the gun industry accountable. Meanwhile, other states passed bills, e.g., to expand gun industry immunity and to prohibit enforcement of red flag laws.⁴³

Six Steps that the Federal Government Could Take Immediately to Address the Country’s Gun Violence Epidemic

- 1) *Repeal PLCAA*, which gives the gun industry blanket immunity, and *require guns to be subject to the Consumer Protection Act*.⁴⁴
- 2) *Require all gun owners to be licensed in every state*, with mandatory background checks and safety training. Everyone needs a license to drive a car, and likewise everyone should need a license to buy a gun.⁴⁵
- 3) *Ban further sales of assault weapons and high-capacity magazines*.⁴⁶
- 4) *Require mandatory locked storage of guns* in homes, cars, and gun stores. This will reduce accidental gun deaths and injuries, school shootings, suicides, domestic violence, and gun theft.⁴⁷
- 5) *Fund community violence intervention programs*, which include focused deterrence (i.e., on the most violent individuals and groups), mentoring, reorientation of police, and hospital-based intervention programs. Oakland’s Operation Ceasefire employed a data-driven, highly coordinated interagency effort using such programs and succeeded in reducing Oakland’s homicides by 31 percent over five years.⁴⁸

⁴² Bente Birkeland, “Colorado Has Several New Historic Gun Control Laws, All Passed with Little Pushback. What’s Next?” *CPR News*, June 22, 2021, <https://www.cpr.org/2021/06/22/colorado-new-gun-control-laws>.

⁴³ “Gun Law Trendwatch: 2025 Year-End Review,” Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated, <https://giffords.org/analysis/gun-law-trendwatch-2025-year-end-review>.

⁴⁴ Kaya van der Horst and León Castellanos-Jankiewicz, “Ensuring Access to Courts for Gun Victims: The Case for Repealing PLCAA,” *Just Security*, Sept. 8, 2022, <https://www.justsecurity.org/82922/ensuring-access-to-courts-for-gun-victims-the-case-for-repealing-plcaa>.

⁴⁵ “Licensing,” Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/owner-responsibilities/licensing>.

⁴⁶ “Assault Weapons,” Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/hardware-ammunition/assault-weapons>.

⁴⁷ “Child Access Prevention & Safe Storage,” Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, undated, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/child-consumer-safety/child-access-prevention-and-safe-storage>.

⁴⁸ Annie Berman, “Oakland’s Operation Ceasefire is working, according to study,” *Oakland North*, Sept. 6, 2018, <https://oaklandnorth.net/2018/09/06/ceasefire>.

- 6) *Support groups transforming physical spaces in neighborhoods with high rates of crime and poverty.* As one example, an emergency doctor in Philadelphia teamed up with partner organizations to transform trash-strewn vacant lots into healthy, clean green spaces, and violent crime declined by as much as 29 percent in Philadelphia neighborhoods plagued by gun violence.⁴⁹

For more information:

- *The Trace*, a Bloomberg news service devoted to gun violence coverage (their weekly newsletter is highly recommended), <https://www.thetrace.org>
- Gun safety advocacy organizations listed in Chapter 22 of this toolkit

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Photo: Las Vegas: Guns Guns Guns! by Bob Bobasonic, June 21, 2006, licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#).

⁴⁹ Eugenia C. South, “To Combat Gun Violence, Clean Up the Neighborhood,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/08/opinion/gun-violence-biden-philadelphia.html>.



Chapter 17. Selected Mass Shootings 1999-2024

The following list includes shootings with four or more people killed and ten or more total shooting victims (killed and wounded). It also includes shootings at houses of worship (highlighted in blue) with four or more people killed, even if the total number of shooting victims is less than ten.¹

April 20, 1999, at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado: 13 killed, 24 wounded

July 29, 1999, at Offices of All-Tech Investment Group and Momentum Securities in Atlanta, Georgia: 9 killed, 12 wounded

September 15, 1999, at Wedgewood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas: 7 killed, 7 wounded

July 8, 2003, at Lockheed Martin in Meridian, Mississippi: 6 killed, 8 wounded

December 8, 2004, at Alrosa Villa Nightclub in Columbus, Ohio: 4 killed, 7 wounded

March 12, 2005, at Living Church of God in Brookfield, Wisconsin: 7 killed, 4 wounded

March 21, 2005, at Red Lake High School on the Red Lake Indian Reservation in Red Lake, Minnesota: 9 killed, 5 wounded

May 21, 2006, at Ministry of Jesus Christ Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana: 5 killed, 1 wounded

October 2, 2006, at West Nickel Mines Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania: 5 killed, 5 wounded

April 16, 2007, at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia: 32 killed, 17 wounded

¹ The number of fatalities does not include the shooter(s). Sources: Stanford Mass Shootings in America database, <https://github.com/StanfordGeospatialCenter/MSA>; Gun Violence Archive, <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org>.

December 5, 2007, at the Westroads Mall in Omaha, Nebraska: 8 killed, 4 wounded

[December 9, 2007, at Youth With a Mission and New Life Church, Arvada, Colorado: 4 killed, 5 wounded](#)

February 14, 2008, at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois: 5 killed, 17 wounded

March 29, 2009, at Pinelake Health and Rehab nursing home in Carthage, North Carolina: 8 killed, 2 wounded

April 3, 2009, at American Civic Association immigration services center in Binghamton, New York: 13 killed, 4 wounded

November 5, 2009, at Fort Hood Army Base, near Killeen, Texas: 13 killed, 32 wounded

August 3, 2010, at Hartford Beer Distributors in Manchester, Connecticut: 8 killed, 2 wounded

January 8, 2011, in a supermarket parking lot near Tucson, Arizona: 6 killed, 13 wounded (including U.S. Rep. Gabby Giffords)

September 6, 2011, at Carson City IHOP, Carson City, Nevada: 4 killed, 7 wounded

April 2, 2012, at Oikos University in Oakland, California: 7 killed, 3 wounded

July 20, 2012, at Century Aurora 16 movie complex in Aurora, Colorado: 12 killed, 58 wounded

[August 5, 2012, at the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin in Oak Creek, Wisconsin: 6 killed, 4 wounded](#)

December 14, 2012, at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut: 26 killed, 2 wounded

September 16, 2013, at Washington Navy Yard in Washington, D.C.: 12 killed, 3 wounded

[June 17, 2015, at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina: 9 killed](#)

October 1, 2015, at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon: 9 killed, 7 wounded

December 2, 2015, at Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California: 14 killed, 21 wounded

June 12, 2016, at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida: 49 killed, 53 wounded

July 7, 2016, near El Centro College in Dallas, Texas: 5 killed, 9 wounded

January 6, 2017, at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport in Florida: 5 killed, 6 wounded

October 1, 2017, on the Las Vegas Strip, Nevada: 58 killed, 441 wounded

[November 5, 2017, at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas: 26 killed, 20 wounded](#)

November 14, 2017, at Rancho Tehama Elementary School in Corning, California: 5 killed, 12 wounded

February 14, 2018, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida: 17 killed, 17 wounded

May 18, 2018, at Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas: 10 killed, 13 wounded

[October 27, 2018, at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: 11 killed, 6 wounded](#)

November 7, 2018, at Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, California: 12 killed, 2 wounded

February 15, 2019, at Henry Pratt Company in Aurora, Illinois: 5 killed, 6 wounded

May 31, 2019, at Virginia Beach Municipal Center in Virginia Beach, Virginia: 12 killed, 4 wounded

August 3, 2019, at Walmart Supercenter in El Paso, Texas: 23 killed, 23 wounded

August 4, 2019, at Oregon Historic District in Dayton, Ohio: 9 killed, 17 wounded

August 31, 2019, on the streets of Midland and Odessa in West Texas: 7 killed, 23 wounded

March 16, 2021, at three spas or massage parlors in the Atlanta, Georgia, area: 8 killed, 1 wounded

March 22, 2021, at King Soopers supermarket in Boulder, Colorado: 10 killed

April 15, 2021, at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis, Indiana: 8 killed, 7 wounded

November 30, 2021, at Oxford High School in Oxford, Michigan: 4 killed, 7 wounded

April 3, 2022, in downtown Sacramento, California: 6 killed, 12 wounded

May 14, 2022, at Tops Friendly Market in Buffalo, New York: 10 killed, 3 wounded

May 24, 2022, at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas: 21 killed, 17 wounded

July 4, 2022, at a parade in Highland Park, Illinois: 8 killed, 29 wounded

November 19, 2022, at Club Q in Colorado Springs, Colorado: 5 killed, 17 wounded

January 21, 2023, at Star Ballroom Dance Studio in Monterey Park, California: 11 killed, 9 wounded

April 10, 2023, at Old National Bank in Louisville, Kentucky: 5 killed, 8 wounded

April 15, 2023, at a birthday party in a dance hall in Dadeville, Alabama: 4 killed, 15 wounded

May 6, 2023, at an outlet mall in Allen, Texas: 8 killed, 7 wounded

October 25, 2023, at a bowling alley and bar in Lewiston, Maine: 18 killed, 13 wounded

September 4, 2024, at Apalachee High School in Winder, Georgia: 4 killed, 9 wounded

September 21, 2024, at Five Points South entertainment district, Birmingham, Alabama:
4 killed, 17 wounded

July 2, 2025, outside a restaurant in the River North neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois: 4 killed,
14 wounded

September 28, 2025, at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Grand Blanc Township,
Michigan: 4 killed, 8 wounded

October 10, 2025, in downtown Leland, Mississippi, following a high school football game:
7 killed, 12 wounded

October 12, 2025, at a bar and grill on St. Helena Island, South Carolina: 4 killed, 16 wounded

November 29, 2025, at a child's birthday party in Stockton, California: 4 killed, 13 wounded

*Photo: Memorial to the Virginia Tech shooting victims, by Ross Catrow, Apr. 21, 2007, licensed
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Chapter 18. Countering Common Myths about Gun Violence¹

Myth: A gun in the home makes you safer.

Study after study proves that the choice to keep a gun in the home creates far more risk than it prevents. Statistically speaking, home invasions are rare, but shootings by a relative or acquaintance are all too common. For every time a gun is used in self-defense in the home, there are seven assaults or murders, 11 suicide attempts, and four accidental shootings.²

Myth: The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.

Facts simply don't bear this out. Even a highly trained person, such as a law enforcement officer, only hits his or her target about 50 percent of the time. The likelihood that a gunowner with much less training can, in the heat of a mass shooting, take down the right man or woman is extremely low. Worse still, if law enforcement arrives at a crime, that "good guy with a gun" may be mistaken for the perpetrator.³

Myth: Guns are more likely to protect you than hurt you.

Only one in 37 gun homicides is a justifiable homicide. In other words, you are 36 times as likely to be killed by a gun as protected by one. And these figures do not even consider the tens of thousands of lives lost each year in firearm suicides and unintentional gun deaths. Only a tiny

¹ For a fuller treatment of these myths and many others, see *American Carnage: Shattering the Myths That Fuel Gun Violence* by Thomas Gabor and Fred Guttenberg (2023).

² A.L. Kellermann et al., "Injuries and deaths due to firearms in the home," National Library of Medicine, Aug. 1998, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/9715182/>; Melinda Wenner Moyer, "Will a Gun Keep Your Family Safe? Here's What the Evidence Says," *The Trace*, Apr. 7, 2020, <https://www.thetrace.org/2020/04/gun-safety-research-coronavirus-gun-sales>.

³ Larry Buchanan and Lauren Leatherby, "Who Stops a 'Bad Guy with a Gun'?" *The New York Times*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/06/22/us/shootings-police-response-uvalde-buffalo.html>; "New Study on Shooting Accuracy. How Does Your Agency Stack Up?" Daigle Law Group, Nov. 21, 2018, <https://daiglelawgroup.com/new-study-on-shooting-accuracy-how-does-your-agency-stack-up>.

fraction of the intended victims of violent crime or property crime employ guns for self-defense.⁴

Myth: We have a mental health problem, not a gun problem.

Research indicates that only three to five percent of violent acts are attributable to persons with a serious mental illness, and such violence is typically directed at immediate family members and mental health practitioners, not strangers. Researchers estimate that persons with mental illness are responsible for fewer than 1 percent of all gun-related homicides. Persons with mental illness are, however, at a much higher risk for suicide, and they are more than ten times more likely to be victims of violence than the general population.⁵

The United States has rates of mental illness comparable to the rest of the world, yet much higher rates of gun ownership and gun violence.

Myth: The Supreme Court has ruled that the Second Amendment prohibits any legislation concerning guns.

In *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008) and *New York State Rifle & Pistol Ass’n v. Bruen* (2022), the Supreme Court recognized the right of individuals to possess firearms for home defense and to carry firearms in public without a showing of particularized need. But the Court did not prohibit all regulation of firearms. In evaluating government regulation of firearms, courts are to determine whether the law in question “is consistent with the Nation’s historical tradition of firearm regulation.” Laws likely to be upheld under the Court’s rulings include requirements for background checks and safety training, bans on firearms in schools and other sensitive areas, and restrictions on automatic and semiautomatic weapons.⁶

Myth: Gun control doesn’t work. Chicago and D.C. have had some of the strictest gun control laws in the country and yet violence remains high.

Chicago and the District of Columbia are both adjacent to states with much looser gun laws (Wisconsin, Indiana, and Virginia). It is very easy for gun traffickers to buy as many guns as they want and take them across state lines.⁷ This is why federal gun legislation is so important.

Myth: Instead of making new gun laws, we need to enforce the ones we have.

Current gun laws have significant gaps in coverage. For example, under current law, background checks are required only for sales by licensed gun dealers. The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, enacted in 2022, clarifies which sellers are required to obtain a Federal

⁴ “As COVID-19 Fears Increase Gun Sales, New Violence Policy Center Study Reveals How Rarely Guns are Used in Self Defense,” Violence Policy Center, May 13, 2020, <https://vpc.org/press/as-covid-19-fears-increase-gun-sales-new-violence-policy-center-study-reveals-how-rarely-guns-are-used-in-self-defense>.

⁵ Emilee Green, “Mental Illness and Violence: Is there a Link?” Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, May 4, 2020, <https://icjia.illinois.gov/researchhub/articles/mental-illness-and-violence-is-there-a-link>.

⁶ Jacob D. Charles, “Are Gun Laws Constitutional? Courts Must Now Look at History to Decide.” *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/06/30/bruen-clarence-thomas-supreme-court-second-amendment>. In *United States v. Rahimi* (2024), the Supreme Court upheld a federal statute that prohibits individuals subject to a domestic violence restraining order from possessing a firearm.

⁷ Danielle Kurtzleben, “Fact Check: Is Chicago Proof That Gun Laws Don’t Work?” *National Public Radio*, Oct. 5, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/05/555580598/fact-check-is-chicago-proof-that-gun-laws-don-t-work>.

Firearms License, but sales or transfers by others remain exempt.⁸ Moreover, even a licensed dealer may complete a sale to a person who has not yet passed a background check, if more than three business days have elapsed since the dealer initiated the background check. This is the loophole that permitted the shooter at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, to buy his murder weapon.⁹

We also lack any federal laws against military-style weapons and high-capacity magazines, which are the weapon of choice in most mass shootings. A ban on such weapons was enacted in 1994, but it expired in 2004 and has not been renewed.¹⁰

Myth: The only way for a woman to feel safe is to have a gun.

This is a gun industry selling point, not based on fact. Studies show that a gun in a woman's home is far more likely to be used against her or her family than to defend against an outside attacker. Increasing gun ownership by women would only heighten that risk. One key study concluded that the presence of a firearm in a woman's home triples the odds that she will be killed, usually by an intimate partner.¹¹

From 2002 to 2012, more women were murdered in the United States by an intimate partner than all the U.S. troops killed in action during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan combined.¹²

Myth: Gun laws don't work because criminals don't obey the law; gun laws only punish law-abiding gun owners.

According to figures from the FBI, as of June 2021, background checks had stopped more than 4 million prohibited gun purchases since 1994. More than 300,000 of those attempted sales were in 2020, and 42 percent of those were to people with felony criminal convictions. A 2019 study found that states that required background checks for all gun sales had homicide rates 15 percent lower than states without such laws over a 26-year period.¹³

⁸ Chip Brownlee, "What Will the First Federal Gun Reform Law in Three Decades Actually Do?" *The Trace*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.thetrace.org/2022/07/bipartisan-safer-communities-act-gun-law>.

⁹ "Background Check Procedures," Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/background-checks/background-check-procedures>.

¹⁰ "Assault Weapons," Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/hardware-ammunition/assault-weapons>.

¹¹ Devin Hughes and Evan DeFilippis, "Gun-Rights Advocates Claim Owning a Gun Makes a Woman Safer. The Research Says They're Wrong." *The Trace*, May 2, 2016, <https://www.thetrace.org/2016/05/gun-ownership-makes-women-safer-debunked>.

¹² Katie Sanders, "Steinem: More Women Killed by Partners since 9/11 than Deaths from Attacks, Ensuing Wars," *PolitiFact*, Oct. 7, 2014, <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2014/oct/07/gloria-steinem/steinem-more-women-killed-partners-911-deaths-atta>. The numbers are roughly 11,000-15,000 U.S. women killed by intimate partners versus roughly 7,000 U.S. troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan during the same period. For another compelling comparison, consider that, since 1968, more than 1.5 million people have been killed by daily, largely urban gun violence—more than the 1.2 million Americans killed in all of our wars from 1775-2021, the American Revolution through the "war on terror." See Chelsea Bailey, "More Americans Killed by Guns Since 1968 Than in All U.S. Wars — Combined," *NBC News*, Oct. 4, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/las-vegas-shooting/more-americans-killed-guns-1968-all-u-s-wars-combined-n807156>.

¹³ "2020 FBI Data Obtained by Everytown Shows Background Checks Stopped Over 300,000 Illegal Gun Sales — A Record High, Nearly Double 2019 Numbers, June 22, 2021, [continued on next page]

Regarding assault weapons, both the number of mass shootings and the number of deaths in such incidents decreased during 1994-2004, the years the federal Assault Weapons Ban was in effect, and they increased when the ban expired and was not renewed.¹⁴

Numerous studies have found that child access prevention laws can reduce suicide and unintentional gun deaths and injuries among children and teens by up to 54 percent, with the greatest reductions occurring in states with safe storage requirements.¹⁵

Myth: Preventing those contemplating suicide from buying a gun will not prevent them from self-harm.

Suicide attempts are often impulsive acts, driven by transient life crises. Most attempts are not fatal, and 90 percent of suicide survivors don't go on to end their own lives. Whether a suicide attempt is fatal depends heavily on the lethality of the method used—and firearms are extremely lethal. The most commonly used method in suicide attempts is drug overdose, which is fatal in less than 3 percent of cases. But about 85 percent of suicide attempts with a firearm end in death.¹⁶

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Agudas Achim Congregation, Alexandria, VA

Photo: Handgun and bullets, by St. Louis Circuit Attorney's Office, Nov. 16, 2012, licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

<https://www.everytown.org/press/2020-fbi-data-obtained-by-everytown-shows-background-checks-stopped-over-300000-illegal-gun-sales-a-record-high-nearly-double-2019-numbers>; Michael Siegel et al., "The Impact of State Firearm Laws on Homicide and Suicide Deaths in the USA, 1991–2016: a Panel Study," *Journal of Internal Medicine*, Mar. 28, 2019, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11606-019-04922-x>.

¹⁴ Michael J. Klein, "Did the Assault Weapons Ban of 1994 Bring Down Mass Shootings? Here's What the Data Tells Us," *The Conversation*, June 8, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/did-the-assault-weapons-ban-of-1994-bring-down-mass-shootings-heres-what-the-data-tells-us-184430>.

¹⁵ "Child Access Prevention and Safe Storage," Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/child-consumer-safety/child-access-prevention/#footnote_6_5593.

¹⁶ Beth Duff-Brown, "Handgun Ownership Associated with Much Higher Suicide Risk," *Stanford Medicine*, June 3, 2020, <https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2020/06/handgun-ownership-associated-with-much-higher-suicide-risk.html>; "Reducing Suicides by Firearms," American Public Health Association, Nov. 13, 2018, <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2019/01/28/reducing-suicides-by-firearms>; Madeline Drexler, "Guns & Suicide: The Hidden Toll," *Harvard Public Health*, https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/magazine/magazine_article/guns-suicide.

Ways for Congregations to Address Gun Violence



Chapter 19. Gun Violence Prevention Projects for Congregations

The first step in building an effective gun violence prevention program at one's faith community is educating congregants about gun violence and measures to prevent it. Congregational engagement can be achieved through a wide variety of programs, examples of which are presented in this chapter.¹

1. Assessing Congregational Interest in GVP Activism

One way to start is to assess congregational interest in initiating a GVP program or undertaking specific projects as part of an existing program. Many congregations have had success using congregational surveys or listening sessions in developing a comprehensive program that includes shorter- and longer-term goals.

For example, before Bethesda United Methodist Church formed its Gun Violence Prevention Ministry, congregants were invited to meet after a Sunday worship service to discuss their concerns about gun violence and what types of activities they would be interested in pursuing. A congregant survey formed the basis for that conversation and assessment of interest.²

Temple Sinai's GVP Group held a listening session during which congregants identified projects they wanted to undertake over the course of the forthcoming year. As the next step in its planning process, the GVP Group sent an email to congregants who were members of the GVP Group or Social Action Committee, identifying several project areas and requesting volunteers.

St. John's Episcopal Church, Norwood Parish, held a series of three clergy-led planning meetings to explore ways that parishioners could get involved in GVP activism. The monthly meetings

¹ See Chapter 20 on enlisting the support of the congregation's leadership for whatever initial activities the GVP volunteers may wish to undertake.

² See <https://bit.ly/assessing-interest> for specifics on the three examples in this section.

took place on Sunday afternoons over the course of three months. Following the final meeting, the minister reported back to parishioners via the church's newsletter. He explained that, at the final meeting, the group agreed to move forward with a three-pronged approach of prayer, education, and action. He invited parishioners to look for announcements of upcoming activities in the weekly newsletter, and he invited them to become more involved in GVP issues.

2. Fact Sheets

Congregations have successfully used fact sheets as a means of disseminating information about gun violence prevention. While each fact sheet will be unique to the congregation and situation, consider including four basic components:

- The religious basis for GVP advocacy
- Background information about gun violence
- Action ideas
- Resources for more information

Fact sheets can be placed on an information table, handed out at a worship service or other event, or provided in a brochure box outside the place of worship. Some congregations have used brochure boxes with fact sheets as part of their T-shirt gun violence victims' memorials or other lawn displays (described in section 4 below).

Fact sheets can also be mailed to congregants or sent electronically in a congregational bulletin, GVP news update, or similar communication. Consider the various communication vehicles your congregation already has in place to see how you can minimize effort and maximize impact.

For example, Heeding God's Call to End Gun Violence prepared a fact sheet to explain its "Memorial to the Lost" T-shirt display. Using a Q&A format, it provided facts and figures for gun-related homicides in the D.C. Metro area and focused on a spiritual and communal approach to the need for action to prevent gun violence.³

Bethesda United Methodist Church produced a fact sheet in the aftermath of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting that took place on February 14, 2018, in Parkland, Florida. In addition to Biblical sources supporting GVP, the fact sheet included a link to a statement issued by Bishop Ken Carter of the Florida Conference in which he called upon United Methodists to respond to the shooting by offering letters to local, state, and national government officials, urging them to prioritize "the safety and sanctuary of our children."

A fact sheet can also be produced in other formats, such as a postcard. The Washington National Cathedral created a 5"x 7" postcard that succinctly listed key facts and figures and invited readers to join the Cathedral's GVP efforts by visiting the Cathedral's website. It was printed on card stock to make it more likely that people would save it, rather than treat it as a throwaway. The card was passed out after Cathedral services, at GVP events, in meetings at Senate and House member offices, etc.

³ See <https://bit.ly/sample-fact-sheets> for the three sample fact sheets described in this section.

3. Information and News Updates

If your congregation sends a periodic bulletin, newsletter, or social action update, you may be able to use that publication to highlight a particular GVP issue. Consider writing a regular column that shares facts and figures, legislative developments, or other news about events and programs.

You can also send periodic emails that exclusively address GVP issues. These can be used to alert congregants to issues that require prompt action (such as quick-turnaround support for pending legislation).

The information should be presented in a succinct manner that will catch people's attention and get your message across without a lot of reading. The goal is to make it easy for your audience to learn and take action. It's useful to identify your sources if you are providing statistics and to provide links or website addresses to sources for more information.

For example, St. John's Episcopal Church, Norwood Parish, has a congregational newsletter that is used to publicize information about various church events, including those relating to GVP efforts. Two articles highlighted activities for the 2021 Wear Orange Weekend.⁴

The St. John's GVP Group maintains an email list of parishioners who have expressed an interest in GVP activism. The GVP Group Convener sends periodic emails to these people with information and updates on GVP issues, advocacy requests, meeting notices, and other timely news. This type of informal communication can be highly effective.

As circumstances warrant, the St. John's Social Justice Ministry will issue action alerts requesting that parishioners contact elected officials or take other action to advocate for specific policies or legislation. These alerts include background information and portals for submitting letters. A recent action alert asked parishioners to contact their U.S. Senators to support the Background Checks Expansion Act.

4. Lawn Displays

Banners, signs, and T-shirt memorials to victims can be used as a catalyst for congregational engagement and for increasing public awareness.⁵

For several years, faith organizations around the country have hosted gun violence victims' memorials in the form of lawn displays that create the image of a cemetery. Typically, T-shirts are draped over stakes planted in the ground, bearing the names, ages, and dates of death of individuals who died as a result of gun violence.

A T-shirt display conceived as a "Memorial to the Lost" by [Heeding God's Call](#) is designed to encourage congregants and members of the public to reflect upon the victims of gun violence and the life-long impact their deaths will have on their loved ones. Its goal is to create

⁴ See <https://bit.ly/info-and-updates> for the examples described in this section.

⁵ See <https://bit.ly/lawn-displays> for samples of all three types of displays.

awareness and encourage people to take action to end gun violence—to become informed, to contact elected officials in support of sensible gun legislation, and to show public support at rallies and vigils.

Planning for a display includes deciding on the timeframe for the memorial and the number of victims whose names will be printed on the T-shirts, researching victims' names, recruiting volunteers for setup and takedown, planning publicity, and obtaining supplies.

T-shirt memorials are often displayed in conjunction with other awareness and advocacy programs. The following are a few ideas for additional activities:

- Involvement with religious school students in upper grades for various aspects of planning and setting up the display (e.g., researching victims' names via databases, writing the names on T-shirts, and helping to set up and take down the display)
- T-shirt display dedication and removal ceremonies
- Guest speakers on gun violence prevention during the display period
- Clergy sermon and reading of the victims' names at a worship service
- A letter-writing or petition campaign relating to local or national legislation

5. Indoor Displays

Tabletop or wall-mounted displays can have a significant impact, particularly if they draw the viewers' attention with photos or videos.⁶

For example, at St. John Neumann Catholic Church, a tabletop display was set up in the church lobby for Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath Weekend. The display board featured the names and photos of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting victims, a list of GVP measures that had the support of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, and the editorial page from *The Washington Post* listing a large number of mass shootings (the *Post* publishes an updated list from time to time). The information table had fact sheets on gun violence, including a background paper from the U.S. Bishops, a book on gun violence that the church's Pax Christi group had read and discussed together, and a sign-up sheet for interested parishioners to get on the Pax Christi email list.

In 2019, Temple Sinai presented "Washington's Other Monuments," an exhibit of photographs and videos depicting spontaneous, homemade street memorials erected by family and friends to honor the memory of gun violence victims in the D.C. Metro area. The exhibit was the work of local photographer Lloyd Wolf and local videographer Curtis Mozie. The 10-day exhibit opened with a panel discussion that included Wolf and Mozie; Ryane Nickens, founder and president of D.C.'s TraRon Center, which seeks to help those impacted by gun violence through the arts and political activism; and Mitch Credle, an author, filmmaker, and former DC Homicide Detective.

⁶ See <https://bit.ly/indoor-displays> for specifics on the examples described in this section.

6. Speakers and Panel Discussions

Guest speakers and panel discussions can contribute greatly to educating congregants and the broader community. They can also serve as a mechanism for public policy discussions and problem-solving initiatives. As with other GVP projects, these programs can be planned in conjunction with other types of activities and co-sponsored with other congregations and community groups.⁷

When selecting a subject for your program, look to current events with an eye toward a broad range of possible topics, including the following:

- The first-hand experience of gun violence survivors, families, and friends
- Policy issues raised by recent acts of gun violence
- Current or forthcoming legislative proposals
- Local or national programs to prevent gun violence
- Recently released studies or other research

For topic ideas and related background information, visit the websites of GVP advocacy organizations, such as those listed in Chapter 22 of this toolkit.

To identify speakers or panel participants, again look to current events to identify people who are involved in GVP activism, including elected and other governmental officials. It may be useful to contact local GVP organizations or local chapters of national organizations (see list in Chapter 22) to find out if they have a speaker's bureau or can otherwise connect you with knowledgeable speakers.

Other faith communities that have presented speakers and panel discussions can also be a source of recommendations. Some of the most powerful and inspirational speakers are those who have experienced the tragedy of gun violence first-hand.

If you're going to have more than one speaker at your program, you'll want to hold a preparatory conference call at least one week before the program. That will enable each speaker to share an overview of his or her intended remarks and will give you an opportunity to offer suggestions to make the program as informative and cohesive as possible. You will also be able to explain the program format and logistics (such as order of speakers, use of PowerPoint presentations and other visuals, Q&A session, recording, handouts, etc.) and answer any questions the speakers might have.

Try to maximize the size of your audience. Brainstorm with your colleagues to ascertain the optimal date, time, and location to present your program. Tying the program to a regularly scheduled event, such as a worship service or other gathering, can expand your reach. As noted above, co-sponsoring the program with one or more other congregations or community groups

⁷ See <https://bit.ly/speakers-panel-discussions> for examples of various speaker programs.

can also increase your audience size. Consider streaming the event or using Zoom, even when you are presenting an in-person program.

Obtain feedback from program attendees, as well as from speakers and panelists. Prepare a short, easy-to-complete evaluation form that can be distributed to attendees at the end of the program or in a follow-up email. This feedback will help you assess whether the benefits of the program (disseminating information, generating GVP activism, advancing problem-solving) justified the costs (money, time, and effort spent putting on the program). Consider the following topics for attendee evaluations:

- Quality of the speakers/panelists (knowledge, substance of presentation, public speaking skills)
- Format of the program (number of speakers/panelists, opportunity to ask questions, use of visuals, availability of handouts)
- Length of the program
- Program logistics (convenient date and time, easily accessible location, including parking)
- How helpful the program was
- Whether the attendee would like to be included on your GVP email list

Getting feedback from the speakers/panelists can assist you with planning future programs. You may want to have an informal one-on-one conversation, rather than initiate an email exchange or ask them to fill out an evaluation form. Keep in mind that your presenters have probably given other public presentations, so their ideas about your program are likely to reflect their experiences with other GVP events. In this regard, it may be useful to keep your questions open-ended to start with, and follow up with more specific questions as needed, e.g.,

- “Did you have enough time to prepare for the program?”
- “Were you given enough information about the program to help you adequately prepare?”
- “Do you think the format was effective?”
- “Is there anything you think we should do differently in the future?”

7. Community Involvement

Hands-on engagement with communities that have high rates of gun violence can help those communities reduce gun violence and heal the emotional wounds that survivors experience. River Road Unitarian Universalist Church’s Prevent Gun Violence Ministry and Racial Justice Task Force have combined their efforts in a Baltimore neighborhood to bring about positive change. Programs like this can also have a powerful impact on volunteers and can strengthen their commitment as GVP advocates.⁸

⁸ See <https://bit.ly/river-road-community-involvement> for more information on this initiative.

8. GVP-Themed Worship Services

Many congregations have had success in reaching a broad audience by dedicating a worship service to the theme of gun violence prevention. Clergy engagement and the framework of a regularly scheduled activity make this an effective means for educating congregants and encouraging them to become GVP advocates.

Once you have the support of your clergy, consider scheduling the service for a date that has particular significance for GVP advocacy. For example:

- June is National Gun Violence Awareness Month. The first Friday in June is National Gun Violence Awareness Day, which is the start of “Wear Orange Weekend” (Friday-Sunday). This presents an ideal time for a GVP-themed worship service.
- National Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath Weekend is observed by many congregations on the weekend that includes or is closest to December 14, in honor of the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting on that date in 2012.
- Mark the anniversary of some other specific act of gun violence. The choice of date can also be used to highlight other social concerns, such as racism or other forms of bigotry related to the particular act. Examples include:
 - June 17, 2015—Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Charleston, SC
 - June 12, 2016—Pulse Nightclub, Orlando, FL
 - February 14, 2018—Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Parkland, FL
 - October 27, 2018—Tree of Life Synagogue, Pittsburgh, PA
 - August 3, 2019—El Paso Walmart
 - March 16, 2021—Atlanta area spas
 - May 14, 2022—Tops Friendly Market, Buffalo, NY
 - May 24, 2022—Robb Elementary School, Uvalde, TX
 - July 4, 2022—Highland Park, IL, July 4th parade⁹

See Chapters 10-14 of this toolkit for worship service content ideas. You may want to consider organizing other activities to take place in conjunction with the worship service, including one or more of the other activities described in this chapter.

9. Advocacy

Advocacy is essential to achieving positive change in public policies and laws that impact gun safety. It can take many forms, from letter-writing and petition campaigns to rallies, public vigils, and visits with elected officials. There are many organizations with online resources that can help congregations understand current issues, monitor legislative initiatives, and take action.

⁹ Chapter 17 provides a fuller list of mass shootings in the United States.

If you are monitoring a specific policy issue that is the subject of proposed legislation or regulatory changes, encourage members of your congregation to contact elected officials and others to support (or oppose) the action. Consider developing a list of congregant-activists who have previously indicated their interest in GVP issues and are likely to respond to quick-turnaround action alerts. For more communications ideas, see Section 3 above.

One group found a creative way to enlist the help of members of Congress to reach out to other members of Congress. Swords to Plowshares Northeast and Bishops United Against Gun Violence of the Episcopal Church presented a demonstration of how guns can be transformed into garden tools. Sponsored by Rep. Rosa De Lauro and Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, the media event was designed to educate members of Congress and their staffs, as well as the general public.¹⁰

Temple Sinai reached out to congregations in Virginia to oppose passage of state Senate Bill 1024, which would have repealed the prohibition on guns in houses of worship. The GVP Group compiled a list of Jewish congregations in the districts of three GOP members of the Virginia House of Delegates. It offered to help the Virginia faith community contact those eight congregations to urge them to contact their Delegates to express their opposition to the House passing SB 1024.¹¹ The bill was defeated in the House Rules Committee.

Working with the local chapter of Moms Demand Action in December 2019, St. John's Episcopal Church, Norwood Parish, held a GVP forum in advance of the Maryland General Assembly's 2020 session. After the forum, volunteers wrote postcards to Maryland state legislators, asking them to close the loophole on background checks for private sales of long guns. Parishioners also joined Moms Demand Action and other GVP advocates at the 2020 GVP Advocacy Day in Annapolis. The General Assembly approved the background check measure, but the Governor vetoed it. During its 2021 session, the General Assembly overrode the Governor's veto.

See Chapters 21-23 of this toolkit for a description of various advocacy tools, a list of GVP organizations, and guidance on lobbying by nonprofit organizations.

Photo: "Wear Orange" T-shirt display at Bethesda United Methodist Church, June 2021.

¹⁰ David Paulsen, "Bishop, Blacksmithing Crew Melt Guns for Garden Tools in Swords to Plowshares Demonstration," Episcopal News Service, Nov. 16, 2021, <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2021/11/16/bishop-blacksmithing-crew-melt-guns-for-garden-tools-in-swords-to-plowshares-demonstration>.

¹¹ See <https://bit.ly/HB1024-advocacy> for more information on this example.



Chapter 20. Initiating Congregational Engagement

For a congregation to engage effectively on gun violence prevention, it needs the support of its clergy, possibly its leadership body (board of trustees, elders, vestry, or council), and its members. The congregation also needs the commitment and persistence of a few dedicated volunteers to make the case for GVP engagement to all of these groups. An effective GVP advocate in any congregation requires good oral and written communications abilities, as well as perseverance, hard work, and senses of both humor and perspective.

Gun violence and how to confront it are controversial issues in American society, and that includes our various congregations. Some of us may belong to faiths and pray in houses of worship that have a strong tradition of engaging on various social justice issues like GVP—what those of the Jewish faith often call *tikkun olam*, a mission to “repair the world” from all its various social, economic, and political ills. If so, persuading the clergy, board of trustees, and congregation to engage on GVP may require nothing more than a simple, documented, and well-presented request for action.

Others may belong to concerned but more conservative congregations that prefer to remain “neutral” on contentious issues, such as how to confront the gun violence epidemic in America. And finally, some of us may belong to still more conservative faiths and houses of worship that are more supportive of gun rights than gun safety and therefore generally opposed to the congregation’s taking a moral or ethical stand to advance GVP values and issues.

Thus, knowing your audience or congregation should be the first rule of effective GVP engagement. But once you figure out you have sufficient support in the congregation to proceed, here are some actions that may help you become an effective GVP advocate in your congregation:

1. Find and work with a simpatico member of the clergy.
2. Pick an initial GVP project to engage members of the congregation, especially families.
3. Determine if you’ll need approval from the congregation’s leadership body to proceed with your project and, if so, seek and obtain approval.

4. Evaluate the effectiveness of your initial project, keeping the congregation informed of the results as well as of future activities and accomplishments.
5. Seek ongoing feedback and suggestions from the congregation regarding further GVP actions.
6. Seek to educate your congregations on GVP issues. Look for some “common ground” issues on which you can reach out to members with diverse views, including gun owners, GVP activists, gun violence survivors, and others. Start with the premise that no one wants guns in the hands of someone who may do harm, and explore issues such as reducing gun suicides and keeping children safe when guns are nearby.

A good example of these actions in practice is the first project of the then newly created Gun Violence Prevention Group in Temple Sinai, a large and very socially conscious Reform Jewish congregation in Washington, D.C., with more than 3,000 members.

In October 2016, during the Jewish High Holy Days, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the GVP Group helped Temple Sinai become the first synagogue in the D.C. area to mount a display of more than 200 colored T-shirts with the names, ages, and dates of death of area gun violence victims in 2015. The T-shirt display was called a “Memorial to the Lost” and was offered to Temple Sinai for a two-week period by its originators, a social justice group called Heeding God’s Call to End Gun Violence. (See Chapter 19, Section 4 (pages 87-88) of this toolkit for more information about such lawn displays.)

To advance the T-shirt project, the GVP Group worked very closely with one of the Temple’s three rabbis, who became an invaluable adviser and facilitator to the GVP Group. Before launching the project, the GVP Group made a presentation to the Temple Sinai Board of Trustees. It explained its mission, plans, and the initial T-shirt project.

In response, the Board requested that the GVP Group draft an explanatory letter to be sent out to each congregation member along with their High Holy Day tickets. The letter introduced the GVP Group to the congregation, described the “Memorial to the Lost” project, called upon congregants to help install and dismantle the display, offered sources to consult to discuss the display with children, and urged congregants to support the activities of the GVP Group. Signing the letter were the President of the Temple and Chair of the Board of Trustees, the Chair of the Temple’s Social Action Committee, the Chair of the GVP Group, and the Temple’s Senior Rabbi and Associate Rabbi.

As a result of this careful advance work, the project was well received by the congregation.

Other helpful suggestions can be found in “Gun Violence 101 Cheat Sheet: Responding to the Call to Prevent Gun Violence,” published by the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church.¹ Among them are the following:

¹ Available at <https://www.umcjustice.org/documents/51>.

- Be careful with language, e.g., by talking about gun violence prevention rather than gun control. Lead with values, such as the understanding that with freedom comes responsibility.
- Focus on people who have been impacted by gun violence in your community. Lift up in prayer families that have lost loved ones to violence, whether self-inflicted or otherwise. Invite someone who has experienced gun violence firsthand to come and speak, preferably someone in your community.
- If possible, involve gun owners who believe in commonsense gun laws. Challenge the belief that being a gun owner means being against any gun regulation.
- Bring gun safety into the conversation. Invite someone from the local police department to talk about keeping kids and families safe when there is a gun in the home.
- Encourage small groups of people to begin to talk with their families and friends in the congregation.

You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.

—Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 2:21

Steve Klitzman

Chair, Gun Violence Prevention Group, Temple Sinai, Washington, DC

Photo: Steve Klitzman, Chair of the Temple Sinai Gun Violence Prevention Group, with the “Memorial to the Lost” T-shirt display (courtesy of Steve Klitzman).



Chapter 21. Advocacy

This chapter presents basic information on how you can be an effective advocate for sound public policies to address gun violence. Although it is framed in terms of advocacy with Members of Congress (MOCs—U.S. Representatives and Senators), the same basic principles apply to advocacy with state and local elected officials.

To begin, remember that every attempt at persuading another person must consider what the other person cares about. Every MOC cares first and foremost about the views of his or her constituents, especially those who vote. Also important to MOCs are the views of interest groups and donors, news and editorials in the local press, and activists in their own party. Many MOCs appreciate hearing personal stories of people in their districts/states who have been affected by the issue at hand—in this case, stories of families affected by gun violence.

Your MOC cares little or nothing about the views of people from outside the district/state, a laundry list of issues you are concerned about, lengthy treatises, and form letters.

Your MOC wants to hear from you, regardless of whether you are in total agreement or profound disagreement. Even if you know that your MOC has a firm position on your issue, it is worthwhile to advocate for your view. Do not halt your advocacy just because your MOC is “always right” or “hopelessly wrong.” Never assume that the views and votes of any MOC are carved in stone.

When considering specific advocacy steps and tools, a good rule of thumb is that the more effort an action requires, the greater chance it has of influencing the MOC’s views and votes.

Petitions

Signing a petition is an easy but generally ineffective way of communicating with your MOCs. The minimal effort each person makes in signing a petition means MOCs are unlikely to pay any attention to it. As former Representative Barney Frank explains, a goal in any advocacy is to

persuade your MOC that you care enough about an issue for it to motivate your voting behavior in the next election. “Simply agreeing to put your name on a list does not convey this.”¹

Social media messaging (Twitter, Facebook, etc.)

Like signing a petition, sending a tweet about your MOC or posting a message on the MOC’s Facebook page (or your own) takes minimal effort, and hence it may have little if any influence. But some MOC offices do pay attention to social media messaging. If your message is appropriately tagged to the MOC, identifies you as a constituent, and makes a specific “ask,” it may be worth the effort, particularly if it gains wider attention (retweets, likes, additional Facebook comments, etc.) or adds to a trend. But *don’t stop there*—follow up with one of the other advocacy tools discussed below.²

Letters and emails

Writing a personal snail-mail letter to your MOC has traditionally been one of the most effective actions you can take, mostly because MOCs are aware of the greater level of effort it requires. However, now many MOC offices much prefer email as easier to handle. Regular mail is also much slower, so unless you have a few weeks’ lead time, email is the better option.

Tips for writing a letter or email include the following:

- Limit your letter to one issue.
- Be respectful and professional.
- Avoid spelling and grammatical errors.
- Be succinct: state your specific “ask” (e.g., to support or oppose a particular bill identified by its name and number) and give your main reasons in a paragraph or two. Use your own words, rather than merely copying text from an advocacy organization.
- Humanize your message: state briefly why the issue is important to you—e.g., relating it to your personal experience or faith perspective—or how the issue affects people in the MOC’s district/state.

In addition, for a snail-mail letter:

- Put your address at the top, so your MOC’s staff will see that you’re a constituent.
- Handwriting your letter is fine if your handwriting is legible; if not, typing it is better.³

If you decide to send an email:

- U.S. Representatives and Senators typically have comment forms on their websites that generate emails to the MOC. You’ll be asked to enter your address, so they’ll see that you are a constituent without your having to say so in the text of your message.
- If you’re writing to a State Senator or Delegate or to a city/county official, be sure to include your address in your email, so the staff will see that you’re a constituent.

¹ “Barney Frank: Here’s how to not waste your time pressuring lawmakers,” *Mic*, Feb. 7, 2017, <https://www.mic.com/articles/167878/barney-frank-heres-how-to-not-waste-your-time-pressuring-lawmakers>.

² See “Tips for Using Social Media for Advocacy,” National MPS Society, April 2018, <https://bit.ly/3AtF8cW>.

³ For the mailing addresses, website URLs, and phone numbers of your MOCs, visit www.usa.gov/elected-officials.

Some advocacy organizations will invite you to send a standardized email message—the electronic version of a form letter—to your MOCs from the organization’s website. This makes it easy for you to send the same message to your three MOCs simultaneously. But MOCs pay much less attention to such form letters, both because they see the exact wording over and over and because they know that you didn’t put much effort into it. If the organization’s website allows you to edit the email text, so you can put it in your own words and humanize the message, that might be a good option.

Don’t overdo it with email messages. If you write your MOCs on a near-daily basis about a raft of issues, your messages will be ignored. Focus on the issues you care most about and write when some specific action is pending or urgently needed.

Phone calls

Phone calls are also an effective way of communicating your views to your MOCs, particularly on hot-button issues of the day. Your MOCs are already getting lots of calls on such issues, and it’s important that your views get tallied along with those of other callers. Limit each call to a single issue.

Before calling, decide whether you just want to register your opinion for or against some pending action, or whether you want to have a substantive discussion with the MOC’s staff about it. If the issue has a high profile, such that the MOC is undoubtedly very aware of the arguments and your opinion is likely shared by many other callers, leaving a brief message is sufficient:

- Give your name, city, and zip code (so it’s clear you’re a constituent) and say you don’t need a response (so they can tally your call quickly).
- State your position in a single sentence, asking the MOC to support or oppose the pending action (including the name and number of the bill, if relevant).
- If you want to say why you hold that position, do so in a sentence or two. But it’s not necessary to give a reason, and the staff may not even write it down. If they’re inundated with calls, they may simply note the number of pro and con messages received.

If the issue is one on which you want to have a substantive discussion with a member of the MOC’s staff, you’ll approach the call differently:

- Give your name, city, and zip code (so it’s clear you’re a constituent), state the general issue on which you’re calling, and ask to speak with the legislative aide who handles that issue area.
- Introduce yourself to the aide, get his or her name, and explain why you’re calling. Include your specific “ask” (e.g., to support or oppose a particular bill identified by its name and number), the main reasons for your position, and why the issue is important to you (e.g., relating it to your personal experience or faith perspective) or how the issue affects people in the MOC’s district/state.
- Ask where the MOC stands on the issue. If the aide says that the MOC has already issued a statement on the issue, ask where you can find it or get a copy. If the MOC has

not yet taken a position, offer to provide additional information (if you have it), and ask when you can check back with the aide to get the MOC's response on the issue.

If the person answering the phone says the aide is not available, ask for the aide's name (which the person may or may not give you), and ask to leave a message on the aide's voice mail. In your voice mail message, give your name and phone number and the same points as listed above, and ask that the aide call you back regarding the MOC's position on the issue. If you don't hear back from the aide within a day or two, call again or send an email to the aide (if you have his or her email address) following up on your previous message and asking for a callback.

Visits to the MOC's office

Probably the most effective way to interact with your MOCs and their staffs is by getting a group of people together to visit them in their DC or district offices. You're unlikely to get a meeting with a MOC in his or her DC office while Congress is in session, but you may be able to meet with the MOC (more likely your Representative than a Senator) in his or her district office when the MOC has office hours there or during a Congressional recess. And you should be able to get a face-to-face meeting with the MOC's staff, even when the MOC is unavailable.

Meeting with a MOC or his or her staff gives your group the opportunity to state your "ask" (e.g., to support or oppose a particular bill identified by its name and number), explain your reasons in some detail, provide written information for the MOC to review after your visit (such as a fact sheet or postcard, as described on page 86 of this toolkit), and explain why the issue is important to the members of the group—e.g., relating it to your personal experiences or faith perspective—or how the issue affects people in the MOC's district/state.

It also gives the MOC or his or her staff the opportunity to ask questions, particularly if members of the group have any expertise to offer on the issue. But expertise is not necessary; MOCs need to hear their constituents' concerns and how they are affected.

The Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) suggests the following steps for a visit:

- Choose a topic, preferably a single issue with some specific action pending.
- Decide who's going, including people who can bring different experiences and concerns to bear on the issue.
- Schedule your visit with the MOC's office. This may require multiple requests.
- Prepare for the visit, including deciding who will say what and what written materials to bring.⁴
- Follow your plan in conducting a respectful meeting with the MOC or his or her staff. Clearly state your "ask" and request a commitment by the MOC. If the MOC or staff asks a question to which you don't have an immediate answer, offer to get back to the MOC or staff with the answer, and then do so.
- Follow up after the meeting by sending an email thanking the MOC or his or her staff for the meeting and responding to any questions left unanswered during the visit.

⁴ For a sample plan, see "Lobby Visit Roadmap," FCNL, <https://www.fcnl.org/resources/lobby-visit-roadmap>.

Attendance at an MOC's town hall meeting or public comment hearing

Many MOCs hold town hall meetings and public comment hearings for constituents. The town hall format allows participants to ask questions and receive answers, while a public comment hearing generally does not.

At a town hall meeting, you may introduce your question with a very brief statement of the issue and why you care about it, but you won't be able to share much information, as you could in a visit with the MOC or his or her staff.⁵

At a public comment hearing, you will typically have to register in advance, and you will have only a few minutes to make a statement about the issue under consideration. Prepare your remarks in writing, and make extra copies for the MOC's staff, any media present, and others you may encounter. Your written materials may be a bit longer than your oral remarks and may include attachments.

Letters to the editor

Letters to the editor of a local newspaper can be another effective way of influencing your MOCs, as well as other citizens. As the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) says,

Writing a letter to the editor (LTE) of your local or regional newspaper is an effective and easy way to reach a large audience with your message. LTEs are printed on the editorial page, which is one of the most read pages in the paper. Congressional staffers also tell us that members of Congress keep a close eye on media coverage, including LTEs, in their local papers so they can keep a "pulse" on issues of importance to their constituents. Having a strong letter published helps you reach both a wide public audience and your elected officials with the same effort! Even if your letter is not published, it is important for educating and persuading editors. The more letters they receive on a given topic, the more likely they are to dedicate more time in their newspaper to that issue—both on the editorial page and in news articles. It clearly expresses the issue's importance to the community.⁶

Here are some tips adapted from the UCS for writing an effective LTE:

- Respond to an article, editorial, or op-ed in the paper. Begin your letter by citing the original piece by name, date, and author.
- Follow the newspaper's guidance on how to submit an LTE. Include your letter in the body of the email, and do not include attachments.
- Be timely. Respond to an article within one day of publication, two at the most.
- Share your expertise. If you have qualifications relevant to the topic you're addressing, be sure to include that in your letter.

⁵ See tips for participating in a town hall meeting at <https://www.fairus.org/activism-guide-how-attend-town-hall-meeting>.

⁶ "Writing an Effective Letter to the Editor," Union of Concerned Scientists, Dec. 21, 2017, https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/writing-effective-letter-editor#.WKDa2_Jc-2A.

- Refer to the MOC you're trying to influence by name, which ensures his or her staff will bring your LTE to the MOC's attention.
- Keep your letter short, focused, and interesting. In general, letters should be under 200 words, and 150 or less is best; lengthy letters will be ignored.
- Stay focused on one or at most two main points; and get to the main point in the first two sentences. If possible, include interesting facts, relevant personal experience, and any local connections to the issue.
- Refute, advocate, and make a call to action. Open your letter by refuting the claim made in the original story the paper ran—or or by agreeing with it, if you agree and have additional points to offer. Then use the next few sentences to back up your claims and advocate for your position. Try to focus on the positive. Wrap up with your call to action, explaining what you think needs to happen now. If appropriate, point readers to a source for additional information or to engage in action.
- Be sure to include your name, address, and daytime phone number; the newspaper may want to contact you before printing your letter.
- If your letter is printed, clip it out and send it to your MOC with a brief cover note.

Concluding thoughts

Public policy advocacy, especially on gun violence prevention, is a marathon, not a sprint. Approach it with the understanding that you will be at it for a long time, and that even though you sometimes feel discouraged, you are engaged in noble, holy work.

If at all possible, join a group of likeminded folks who are working on the issue(s) that you care about. Strategize together, exchange ideas, learn from one another, celebrate victories together, mourn losses together.

Mention your faith commitment in your advocacy. Do not be shy about it. However, be sure to include facts, views and ideas that are widely accepted by those who do not share your faith.

Do your homework. Know what you are talking about. Get the names and numbers straight. Learn what your MOC has already done and said on the issue (for example, cosponsoring a bill). If an MOC or staff member asks you a factual question to which you have no answer, admit it, then find the answer within 24 hours and e-mail it to the MOC.

Always respect the humanity of others, even those who disagree with you across a wide range of issues. If your MOC votes the way you requested, send an email of thanks. If your MOC engages in a conversation with you, say a word of thanks at the conclusion, even if you did not see eye to eye. Keep lines of respectful communication open.

Robert Tiller, Baptist Peace Fellowship
Robert More, Pax Christi - St. John Neumann Church, Reston, VA

Photo: NAACP officials meeting with Congresswoman Joyce Beatty (D-OH), by Peacebestill, Mar. 17, 2017, licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).



Chapter 22. Gun Safety Advocacy Organizations

The gun violence prevention movement is blessed with a number of excellent national and state gun safety advocacy organizations that can be relied on for research and advocacy guidance. Here are 19 of them with brief descriptions and links to their websites for further information.

Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, www.bradyunited.org

The Brady Campaign works to pass and enforce federal and state gun laws, regulations, and public policies through grassroots activism, electing public officials who support gun safety legislation, and increasing public awareness of gun violence. According to its website, Brady “emphasizes education, litigation, and legislation to ensure that every community is safe, not only from mass shootings, but also from the daily toll of gun homicide, domestic violence, suicide, unintentional shootings, and police violence that plagues so many communities.”

Do Not Stand Idly By, <http://donotstandidlyby.org>

Do Not Stand Idly By seeks to apply corporate and customer pressure to accomplish what Congress cannot by targeting the gun industry's bottom line. Since police and sheriff departments are major firearms customers, the organization urges public officials to pressure gun manufacturers to explore "smart gun" technology that renders a weapon useless if picked up by someone besides its owner. It also wants gunmakers to tighten distribution networks and crack down on the approximately one percent of legal dealers whose weapons disproportionately turn up at crime scenes.

Everytown for Gun Safety, www.everytown.org

Everytown describes itself as the largest gun violence prevention organization in America, with "nearly 10 million mayors, moms, teachers, survivors, gun owners, students, and everyday Americans [coming] together to make their own communities safer." Under the Everytown umbrella are Mayors Against Illegal Guns, Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, and Students Demand Action for Gun Sense in America (described below), and the Everytown Survivor Network.

Faith Leaders for Ending Gun Violence, <https://www.flegv.org>

"Faith Leaders for Ending Gun Violence is mobilizing, strengthening, and partnering with faith communities to end gun violence. Our vision is faith communities everywhere proclaiming God's dream of human flourishing through meaningful and life-giving participation in gun violence prevention. We are developing a national network of faith-led gun violence prevention, making it possible for faith leaders to connect with each other and to existing and emerging work in their communities."

Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence (website currently unavailable)

Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence is "a diverse coalition of denominations and faith-based organizations united by the call of our faiths to confront America's gun violence epidemic and to rally support for policies that reduce death and injury from gunfire." "As people of faith, we are called by God to offer an alternative to the resigned acceptance of gun violence that is a symptom of a larger, societal culture of death that accepts violence as the norm and relies solely on guns for security."

Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws>

Giffords Law Center works in all 50 states to change policies around gun violence. "Our experts help draft, implement, and defend the laws, policies, and programs proven to make our country safer." "We won't rest until every state has strong gun safety laws and every community is free from the fear of gun violence."

Gun Owners for Responsible Ownership, www.responsibleownership.org

"We are gun owners, outdoor enthusiasts, and veterans who seek reasonable and responsible solutions to preventing gun violence. We envision an America where all are safe from gun violence, and where responsible gun owners take the lead to promote safe gun ownership and

sensible laws and regulations. . . . We believe our Second Amendment rights come with responsibilities. We also believe in common-sense efforts to reduce gun violence and promote gun safety across the country, including background checks on all gun sales, and safe and secure storage of firearms to prevent access by children or any unauthorized individuals.”

Guns Down America, www.gunsdownamerica.org

Guns Down America describes itself as “a bolder, broader movement calling for dramatically fewer guns in America, and for making them dramatically harder to get.” “We are focused on driving elected leaders to live up to their promise of fighting for gun violence prevention legislation and . . . we’re pushing corporations to embrace the cause of gun violence prevention in order to jumpstart the cultural and political change necessary to create safer communities for us all.”

Jewish Gun Violence Prevention Roundtable, <https://www.jwi.org/jgvp-roundtable>

The Jewish Gun Violence Prevention Roundtable “works to amplify the collective voice of the Jewish community in addressing the pervasive issue of gun violence in the United States. By uniting individuals and organizations already involved in diverse approaches to combatting gun violence, our roundtable aims to strengthen our efforts and drive meaningful change. . . . We are further driven by the experiences of being a religious minority disproportionately impacted by hate crimes and alarmed by the epidemic of gun violence that disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable populations.”

Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/departments/health-policy-and-management/research-and-practice/center-for-gun-violence-solutions>

The Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions is a merger of two leading organizations dedicated to gun violence prevention—the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Prevention and Policy and the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence. “We conduct rigorous research and use advocacy to implement evidence-based, equitable policies and programs that will prevent gun violence in our communities.”

March for Our Lives, <https://marchforourlives.com>

Founded after the February 14, 2018, shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, March for Our Lives is a “youth-led movement dedicated to promoting civic engagement, education, and direct action by youth to eliminate the epidemic of gun violence. We aim to create safe and healthy communities and livelihoods where gun violence is obsolete.”

Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence, <https://mdpgv.org>

Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence works to reduce gun violence in Maryland through evidence-based solutions.

Mayors Against Illegal Guns, <https://mayors.everytown.org>

Mayors Against Illegal Guns is a coalition of more than 2,000 current and former mayors across the country. According to the Everytown website, “The bipartisan coalition is united around three common goals: advancing enforcement and data collection strategies to prevent gun violence; investing in victim services and violence intervention programs to address gun violence; and advocating for gun safety legislation at the local, state, and federal level.”

Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, <https://momsdemandaction.org>

Moms Demand Action is a grassroots activist organization formed by stay-at-home mom Shannon Watts following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012. Part of Everytown for Gun Safety, Moms Demands Action works to “pass stronger gun laws and . . . close the loopholes that jeopardize the safety of our families. We also work in our own communities and with business leaders to encourage a culture of responsible gun ownership.”

Moms has active chapters in DC, Maryland, and Virginia that advocate for commonsense policies and laws at the state and local levels, work with other GVP groups, and offer resources on reducing gun violence. Resources include the Be Smart program, which promotes safe and secure storage of guns in the home, and the Survivor Network, which provides support and community for gun violence survivors. Moms chapters welcome any like-minded people—both women and men—to join their effort.

Newtown Action Alliance, www.newtownactionalliance.org

Newtown Action Alliance is an all-volunteer grassroots gun safety organization founded by Newtown, Connecticut, residents after the tragic December 14, 2012, Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting. “We are a group of advocates, families of victims and survivors of gun violence, who are working to transform our tragedy into meaningful action to end gun violence.” Membership is open to anyone concerned about gun violence.¹

97Percent, www.97percent.us

“97Percent is a bipartisan group of Americans that support the Second Amendment, gun safety, and responsible gun ownership. We work together to identify pragmatic solutions to reduce gun violence in our communities.” “Our mission is to reduce gun deaths in America by conducting original research to identify common ground, changing the conversation around gun safety to include gun owners, and leveraging technology to make our communities safer.”

Nuns Against Gun Violence, <https://nunsagainstgunviolence.org>

“Nuns Against Gun Violence is a coalition of Catholic Sisters and their allies that affirms the value of human life through prayer, education, and advocacy for common sense, evidence-

¹ The Alliance also organizes each year, around the anniversary of the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting on December 14, 2012, the National Vigil for All Victims of Gun Violence. On December 7, 2022, President Joe Biden made the first Presidential visit to the annual Vigil, held in St. Mark Episcopal Church on Capitol Hill. See <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/12/07/joe-biden-gun-violence-vigil-00072938>.

based, gun violence prevention. . . . More than 60 communities are involved in building this collaborative, which meets bi-weekly to share resources and events and plan advocacy efforts."

States United to Prevent Gun Violence, <https://supgv.org>

States United to Prevent Gun Violence is an affiliation of 33 independent state gun violence prevention organizations. "As progress on meaningful Federal legislation and action has ground to a halt, it is more urgent than ever that state gun violence prevention groups have the resources they need to effect change on the state and local levels."

Students Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, <https://studentsdemandaction.org>

Another part of Everytown for Gun Safety, Students Demands Action is "a national movement of high school and college-aged volunteers working to end gun violence. Volunteers organize within their schools and communities to educate their peers, register voters, and demand common-sense solutions to this national crisis."

Survivors Empowered, <https://survivorsempowered.org>

Survivors Empowered is a nationally prominent non-profit organization directly supporting and educating gun violence survivors, including most notably the family and friends of shooting victims, as well as shooting survivors themselves. Surviving family and friends need much help to heal, starting with managing the shock that sets in immediately following a shooting. Resources they provide include a [Survivors Toolkit](#), co-authored with Gabby Giffords, which includes tools for advocacy; [Trauma Therapy Resources](#); and [Mindfulness Courses](#).

Third Way, www.thirdway.org

Third Way is a national think tank that seeks to advance public policy. "We are forging common ground on contentious social issues, while fighting efforts to turn back the clock on social progress." Among other issues, Third Way advocates "for gun safety measures that protect responsible owners and do more to keep guns out of the wrong hands."

The Virginia Center for Public Safety, <http://vacps.org>

The Virginia Center for Public Safety is a grassroots organization that works to reduce gun violence in Virginia through awareness, education, and advocacy.

Steve Klitzman

Chair, Gun Violence Prevention Group, Temple Sinai, Washington, DC



Chapter 23. Overview: What Congregations Can or Cannot Do Under Tax Exempt Status¹

Advocacy in the public interest is—or should be—a major part of the mission of any nonprofit, tax-exempt organization. However, the leaders of many groups are reluctant to engage in express advocacy out of fear of jeopardizing their tax-exempt status. All nonprofits may properly and vigorously advocate for the persons and causes they serve, if they so choose, as long as certain well-defined rules and restrictions on lobbying and election activity are followed, applicable to each type of entity.

Please note that this synopsis of IRS requirements is not intended as legal advice. Various houses of worship and denominations may have their own policies that they have thought through carefully, perhaps with the help of their own legal and tax law advisors. If not, this Overview should assist congregations in seeking detailed and up-to-date advice from their own legal and tax law advisors before engaging in GVP advocacy.

Q1. To begin with, what are public charities and what are their restrictions? Public charities constitute the highest class of tax-exempt organizations, those recognized under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code as charitable and educational organizations. Churches and religious organizations qualify automatically as (c)(3) entities without the necessity of applying to IRS for recognition of that status. These entities not only pay no taxes, but contributions to them are tax-deductible to the donors.

However, the favorable tax status conferred on all (c)(3) organizations carries with it limits on their activities, in two pertinent respects—they are limited in the amount of express lobbying advocacy they may engage in, and they are prohibited from engaging in electioneering or participating in political campaigns.

¹ Prepared for Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence in August 2014 by attorney Mike Pretl (who died in 2018). Used with permission. The text has been edited slightly, and editor's notes have been added in italics on this page and page 111.

Q2. What is the definition of “lobbying,” and how does it apply to public charities? There are several definitions of lobbying. Fortunately, a narrow definition is applied by the IRS when it imposes limits on (c)(3) exempt charities.

Each state has its own definition of lobbying for purposes of state registration and regulation. However, the IRS regards activities by (c)(3)s as lobbying only when a specific bill has been introduced in a federal, state, or local legislative body, or an initiative or referendum submitted to the voters, and a person or organization advocates for or against its passage. Advocacy up to the time of introduction of legislation, or approaches to executive or administrative personnel, is not considered lobbying under IRS rules.

Only support for legislation or ballot measures is regarded by the IRS as lobbying by (c)(3) entities. However, the Tax Code states that “no substantial part” of activities of a public charity can be devoted to such advocacy.

Q3. How does IRS define or compute a “substantial part”? More than 20 years ago, the IRS devised a rather simple set of rules—known as the Section 501(h) election—to guide or limit lobbying activity by public charities. An entity can elect to be governed by those well-defined rules by filing a simple one-page IRS form (Form 5768)—available on the IRS website (www.irs.gov).

Thereafter in any year, the charity may spend no more than 20 percent of its total expenditures on express advocacy efforts (i.e., lobbying) and no more than 5 percent on what is termed “grassroots lobbying.” The entity is engaged in grassroots lobbying if it spends funds encouraging its members or other citizens to work to support or defeat specific legislation. There is no downside to electing under Section 501(h); all advocacy charities should be urged to do so.

Q4. What constitutes prohibited “electioneering” or participation in campaign activities? Quite simply, (c)(3) entities cannot support a candidate for public office, a slate of candidates, or a political party. Statement of the prohibition is simple, but manifestations of “support” or varied definitions of “participation” can be complex and often problematic.

Under our federal tax law, an organization exempt under Section 501(c)(3) may
not participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements),
any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.

To begin with the most simple, the (c)(3) entity cannot contribute its own funds to a candidate or party, cannot collect funds from its members or others for support, cannot provide volunteers or other personnel, and cannot endorse or lend its name to a candidate or his or her campaign in any way.

Q5. Can the public charity sponsor a nonpartisan forum or present divergent views of opposing candidates as a public service? Yes—but within limitations which may present risks. The IRS recognizes and permits the (c)(3) to educate the public by staging a forum or other vehicle for contesting views, or by publishing questionnaire responses or similar information

describing candidates' diverse positions. It can also bring in public officials to meet with its members or citizens regarding issues of current concern.

However, the IRS looks at "facts and circumstances" to determine whether the organization may have the intent to, or may—even without specific intent—achieve a likely result of influencing the voters' decision. Some of these circumstances are, for instance, temporal proximity of a meeting with officials to the election cycle, or inviting some but not all of the competing candidates to state their views.

The IRS has also taken the position that when a (c)(3) questionnaire is limited to issues where the organization's position is known or obvious, and it becomes clear that certain candidates will align their views to that position, then any semblance of neutrality is lost, and publication of that data is prohibited. Likewise, a forum staged by an issue-oriented organization may be calculated or likely to favor some candidates and disfavor others—and the IRS may regard these circumstances as crossing the line into political advocacy.

Certainly, there will be many situations where candidates will declare their support for an advocacy entity or its mission—and that may include (c)(3) entities. There is no problem with the candidate endorsing *your* position; but you may not endorse the candidate, or help directly or indirectly to publicize his embrace or endorsement of your position.

Q6. May the (c)(3) entity make general statements of support for unnamed candidates who are aligned with the organization's views and goals? Certainly, the organization or its leaders may encourage its members and others within its ambit to get out and vote, and urge them to support candidates who are aligned with its principles and goals. Even where it may be obvious to the voters who those candidates are, there is no prohibition against the (c)(3) entity's commenting forcefully on the opportunity for its constituents to use the electoral process to advance its goals. The IRS prohibition is invoked only when the organization or its leaders again cross the line and support a specific candidate or party by name.

Q7. Consistent with these general principles, may a faith leader or other (c)(3) leader support a candidate on his own time, without using the exempt organization's resources? Yes, he or she does not forfeit any rights or responsibilities of a private citizen because of his or her leadership of that entity. That may include direct involvement with—even speaking for or endorsing—a candidate. However, especially when the leader is a public figure in the community whose affiliation with the entity is widely known, prudence would dictate to make it clear to listeners that he or she is acting solely in a personal capacity, and not speaking for the entity. Although the IRS does not prohibit the individual's participation in the campaign, there may be instances in your own community where a visible role may be unwise or counterproductive.

Q8. Can the (c)(3) entity invite candidates to address a specific issue (such as prevention of gun violence) or provide information describing the candidates' divergent views on such an issue? The use of issue-oriented forums or voter guides presents the most knotty "advocacy" question facing public charities as they approach an election. As indicated above (Q6), the IRS

looks askance at any effort by the entity to convey a partisan message, or tilt the election in favor of candidates sharing its views. An IRS guidance document has stated, in summary:

[E]ven if a statement does not expressly tell an audience to vote for or against a specific candidate, an organization delivering the statement is at risk of violating the political campaign intervention prohibition if there is any message favoring or opposing a candidate.

More recently, the IRS has sought to clarify its position with respect to a candidates' forum sponsored by an advocacy-oriented (c)(3) entity:

Sometimes a public charity invites several candidates to speak at a public forum. A public forum involving several candidates may qualify as an exempt educational activity. However, if the forum is operated to show a bias for or against any candidate, then the forum would be prohibited campaign activity, as it would be considered intervention or participation in a political campaign. When an organization invites several candidates to speak at a forum, it should consider the following factors:

- Whether questions for the candidate are prepared and presented by an independent nonpartisan panel
- Whether the topics covered by the candidates cover a broad range of issues that the candidates would address if elected to the office sought and are of interest to the public
- Whether each candidate is given an equal opportunity to present his or her views on the issues discussed
- Whether the candidates are asked to agree or disagree with positions, agendas, platforms or statements of the organization, and whether a moderator comments on the questions or otherwise implies approval or disapproval of the candidates

When discussing issues, either in a publication or at a forum, the organization must avoid comparing its own views with those of candidates, or mentioning where candidates stand on the issues most important to them.

The IRS has insisted that the (c)(3) entity always have a “bona fide non-electoral purpose for its activity,” although it often seems clear that the “educational” purpose of the forum blends into advocacy for its goals and mission. Where any forum or advocacy communication could be interpreted as electorally biased, it should—at the least—include an express disclaimer of any candidate endorsement or favoritism.

Q9. Do not some churches and other religious entities explicitly favor candidates whose views they find consonant with their own moral precepts? Under the Internal Revenue Code and regulations, religious groups are held to the same rigid standards of conduct as are other public charities. In practice, however, churches often are permitted by local enforcement officials to engage in political activities clearly prohibited to other (c)(3) entities. Ethically, we cannot counsel religious leaders to violate the law.

Nevertheless, it must be conceded that the risk of IRS sanction seems minimal where matters of principle are concerned—even if they involve rather blatant favoritism in the electoral context.

Q10. Are other nonprofit organizations held to the same standards as public charities? In a word, no. The IRS recognizes more than a dozen other classes of nonprofits under Sections 501(a) and (c), which are exempt from payment of income (and some other) taxes, but their donations are not deductible to the donor.

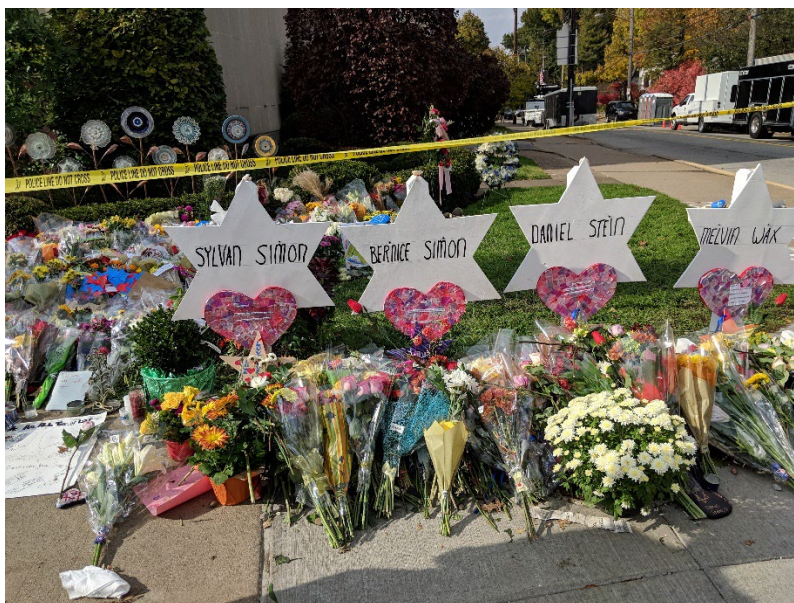
In particular, advocacy “civic” organizations under Section 501(c)(4) can lobby without limitation and can also engage in electioneering and other political efforts, so long as this is not their “primary activity.” (The precise limits of these (c)(4) activities have long been controversial in Congress and elsewhere.)

Of possible interest to (c)(3) groups whose advocacy efforts are frustrated or constrained by IRS regulations as described above, some public charities have established parallel (c)(4) entities—with the approval or even encouragement of the IRS. By this mechanism, they are able to enjoy the best of both nonprofit worlds. Donors can support the entity’s non-political activities, and secure tax deductibility under the (c)(3) umbrella, while other donors are found to support the entity’s political efforts by contributing to its (c)(4) “twin.”

For readers who wish to explore the issues discussed above in greater detail, see the following resources:

- Internal Revenue Service, “Tax Guide for Churches and Religious Organizations (2015), <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p1828.pdf>
- Alliance for Justice, “Live with Bolder Advocacy: Lobbying,” Sept. 19, 2019, <https://www.afj.org/article/live-with-bolder-advocacy-lobbying/>
- Tom Gjelten, National Public Radio, “The Johnson Amendment in 5 Questions and Answers,” Feb. 3, 2017, at <https://www.npr.org/2017/02/03/513187940/the-johnson-amendment-in-five-questions-and-answers>

Photo: Internal Revenue Service Federal Building, by Tony Webster, June 1, 2014, licensed under [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/).



Chapter 24. Enhancing Security at Houses of Worship

Faith communities face a distinct challenge in seeking to provide security at houses of worship during a time of rising gun violence. Information on best practices for enhancing security is available from the government and the private sector, as well as from sources within various faith traditions. The summary information below is presented in a question-and-answer format and includes links to extensive follow-up resources.

Q. Why do mass shooters target houses of worship?

A. Mass shooters at houses of worship tend to fall into two main categories, “those motivated by anti-Semitism, Islamophobia or anti-Christianity, who were not members of the congregation where they committed their crime; and those motivated by domestic issues whose spouse, girlfriend or other family members belonged to a congregation where the attack occurred.”¹

Mass shootings in the first category have become more frequent since the mid-2000s, “committed by perpetrators with a history of racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Christianity and Islamophobia, with ties to white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups.”² For these shooters, a house of worship may be selected as a target for two reasons, “practicality and infamy.”³

First, houses of worship “are places where people who are the target of the attacker congregate.” Second, “killing men, women, and children while they are praying ensures that the

¹ “House of Worship Shootings,” Voice of America, Feb. 2020, <https://projects.voanews.com/mass-shootings/english/locations/worship.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Meghan Keneally, “Experts Dissect Reasons Why Mass Shooters Target Houses of Worship,” ABC News, Mar. 15, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/ABCNews/experts-dissect-reasons-mass-shooters-target-houses-worship/story?id=61708707>.

public will pay attention to the attack and creates an incredible amount of fear, and that is the ultimate objective of the attacker.” Houses of worship are “supposed to be places that are open and inviting to worshippers. It makes establishing physical security complicated because you don’t want that security to serve as a disincentive to people wanting to come and pray.”⁴

Q. What can houses of worship do to enhance their security during our ongoing gun violence epidemic?

A. Possible actions range from simple commonsense practices like locking sanctuary doors and windows to installing cameras and alarms; practicing live shooter drills; posting armed private security guards, uniformed law enforcement officers, or armed volunteer congregants; and applying for federal security grant assistance via state security agencies from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and its Federal Emergency Management Agency. See below for more details.

Q. What are various religious congregations and denominations doing to enhance the security of their houses of worship?

A. Listed below are actions taken by various religious congregations and denominations based on guidance from their leadership.

African Methodist Episcopal. Following threats to their congregations, Atlanta AME churches increased their security, including having church members who are sheriff’s deputies, police officers, or licensed gun owners provide security; using security cameras; and establishing safety routines, safe zones, and exits.⁵

Buddhist. Hate incidents at Asian American Buddhist sites have increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. They have included vandalism of temples and Buddhist statues, as well as verbal harassment of Asian Americans at their houses of worship.⁶ The shooting of six Asian women in Atlanta beauty spas in March 2021, though not in a Buddhist temple, underscored the threat. Temples are enhancing their security through adding security guard hours, installing more cameras, and partnering with other houses of faith to form neighborhood car patrols.⁷

Episcopal. The General Convention of Episcopal Church, the church’s policymaking body, has long supported commonsense gun reforms, and in 2012, the General Convention asked all

⁴ Ibid. See Chapter 17 of this toolkit for a list of mass shootings since 1999, including several at houses of worship. For a complete list of the 88 victims of 11 mass shootings at houses of worship from 1980 to 2018, see the Voice of America Special Report cited in footnote 1. May they all rest in peace and may all their memories be a blessing to their families and friends.

⁵ See Nick Sturdivant, “‘We Cannot Worship in Fear’: Metro Atlanta AME Churches Increase Security After Recent Threats,” 11Alive News, Nov. 24, 2019, <https://www.11alive.com/article/news/local/atlanta-area-ame-churches-security/85-2df46c89-0a95-4367-af56-e476837305b5>.

⁶ Caitlin Yosjhiko Kandil, “Buddhist Temple Attacks Rise as COVID-19 Amplifies Anti-Asian American Bias,” Religion News Service, Dec. 10, 2020, <https://religionnews.com/2020/12/10/buddhist-temple-attacks-rise-as-covid-19-amplifies-anti-asian-american-bias>.

⁷ Alejandra Molina, “LA Buddhist Temple Seeking Balance Between Security and Welcome after Attack,” Religion News Service, Mar. 29, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/03/29/los-angeles-buddhist-temple-seeks-to-remain-welcoming-a-welcoming-space-after-it-was-vandalized>.

churches and dioceses to declare their buildings to be gun-free zones.⁸ More recently, a number of dioceses and congregations have taken additional steps to prepare for possible gun violence emergencies, including updating their emergency plans, hosting Civilian Response to an Active Shooter Event training led by local police, and adding technology, such as buzzed-in entry, automated locking, camera systems, and key access.⁹ The Church Pension Group includes risk management resources and guidance on how to prepare for and handle the aftermath of violence in its insurance handbook.¹⁰

Evangelical. In a survey conducted by the National Association of Evangelicals, 71 percent of evangelical leaders said their local churches have in recent years increased their security at worship services and other church events. The most common responses include partnerships with local law enforcement, the hiring of off-duty police officers, training for volunteer security teams, use of both uniformed and undercover security personnel and security technology, and development of protocols for locked entrances and procedures if an incident were to occur.¹¹

Hindu. In 2015, the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) issued a 16-page temple safety and security guide.¹² The guide noted that bias-motivated violence “may not be completely preventable or predictable, but temples can implement protocols to better prepare and protect its members in the event a hate crime or active shooter incident does occur.” The guide outlines the following steps:

1. Evaluate vulnerabilities of temple premises
 - Conduct a thorough check of doors, windows, and locks, to ensure that they all work
 - If possible, install security cameras and a monitored alarm system
2. Develop a proactive relationship with law enforcement
 - Connect with your local law enforcement agency BEFORE an incident occurs . . .
 - Invite law enforcement representatives to temple events
3. Create a contingency plan for incidents
 - Develop the contingency plan in conjunction with law enforcement
 - Ensure that the plan has clearly delineated tasks, and responsibilities

⁸ Resolution 2012-D003, “Declare Church Sites as Gun-Free Zones,” July 12, 2012, https://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=2012-D003.

⁹ Amy Sowder, “Episcopalians Balance Fear with Preparation in the Wake of U.S. Mass Shootings,” Episcopal News Service, Apr. 19, 2018, <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2018/04/19/episcopalians-balance-fear-with-preparation-in-the-wake-of-u-s-mass-shootings>.

¹⁰ “Safety and Insurance Handbook for Churches,” Church Pension Group, 2022, <https://www.cpg.org/globalassets/documents/publications/safety--insurance-handbook-for-churches.pdf>, pp. 56-58.

¹¹ “Churches Take Steps to Increase Security,” National Association of Evangelicals, June 27, 2019, <https://www.nae.org/churches-take-steps-to-increase-security>. See also Aaron Earls, “Half of US Churches Now Enlist Armed Security: Evangelical, Pentecostal and Baptist Churches Are Most Likely to Have Church Volunteers Carrying Guns,” *Christianity Today*, Jan. 28, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/january/half-of-us-churches-now-enlist-armed-security.html>.

¹² “A Guide to Temple Safety and Security,” Hindu American Foundation, <https://www.hinduamerican.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/HAF-Temple-Safety-Security-Guide.pdf>.

- Train temple staff and volunteers on the contingency plan
 - Print out and visibly post the Active Shooter—How to Respond Poster on the temple premises
4. Work with Other Religious Bodies
- Reach out to other temples, churches, mosques, and synagogues to learn from their security protocols. Create a relationship with these entities to share information and helpful tips.¹³

Jewish. The Secure Community Network (SCN) is “the national homeland security initiative of The Jewish Federation of North America and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. SCN empowers Jewish communities to improve their security through better awareness, resilience, and preparedness.”¹⁴ Up-to-date information on best practices for safety, security, and emergency preparedness for our community organizations can be found both on the SCN website and on the security page of the website of The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington.¹⁵

In 2015, the Anti-Defamation League issued a comprehensive security guide, entitled “Protecting Your Jewish Institution: Security Strategies for Today’s Dangerous World.”¹⁶ The guide covers how to respond to active shooter incidents, violent protests, threats, and surveillance by hostile groups.¹⁷

Lutheran. The website of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America includes a risk management page, with links to various resources dealing with security and other issues.¹⁸ Among the available documents are “Addressing and Preventing Crime in Congregations,” “Active Shooter Event Quick Reference,” and “Active Shooter Study Quick Reference.” Another link, “Protecting Your Congregations Against an Active Shooter,” takes the user to the “Armed Intruder Preparedness” page on the Church Mutual Insurance website, with further resources and videos.¹⁹

Methodist. In 2016, the United Methodist Church adopted Resolution #3428, “Our Call to End Gun Violence.”²⁰ The resolution ended by listing eight items as “some of the ways in which to

¹³ Ibid, 4. The poster is available at <https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/active-shooter-poster-2017-508.pdf>.

¹⁴ Selah Maya Zighelboim, “Michael Masters, Secure Community Network CEO, Discusses Threat Dynamics,” *Jewish Exponent*, Sept. 12, 2019, <https://www.jewishexponent.com/2019/09/12/michael-masters-secure-community-network-ceo-discusses-threat-dynamic>.

¹⁵ <https://securecommunitynetworks.org>; <https://www.shalomdc.org/safety-security-and-emergency-preparedness-resources>.

¹⁶ <https://cdn.fedweb.org/fed-8/2/Protecting%2520Your%2520Jewish%2520Institution.pdf>.

¹⁷ See also David Crary, “Experts Advise Synagogues on Use of Armed Security Personnel,” Associated Press, Jan. 15, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/shootings-north-america-race-and-ethnicity-religion-47342f278c26f83fbefa8aab221e4183>.

¹⁸ <https://www.elca.org/Resources/Risk-Management>.

¹⁹ <https://www.churchmutual.com/6421/Armed-Intruder>.

²⁰ “Our Call to End Gun Violence,” The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2016, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/book-of-resolutions-our-call-to-end-gun-violence>.

prevent gun violence,” including “For United Methodist congregations to display signs that prohibit carrying guns onto church property.” This is read by many congregations as only a recommendation, since there is no language expressly mandating such signs or otherwise prohibiting guns on church property. For example, the Texas Conference of the UMC recommends that Methodist churches in that state prohibit the open carry of handguns on church property but leaves the issue of concealed carry up to individual congregations.²¹ The Church does not otherwise provide guidance for congregations on security issues.

Muslim. In 2013, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) released a 16-page guide on protecting mosques and Islamic institutions.²² It categorizes steps the community can take in six main areas:

- Be Aware
- Assess Your Vulnerability
- Prepare and Plan
- Prevent
- Respond/Mitigate
- Recover

“The booklet stresses the importance of vigilance. It recommends mosques have some kind of ‘security presence’ outside the building as a way to take away ‘the element of surprise’ from the attacker. ‘Should the attacker engage persons outside the mosque, every effort must be made to keep the intruder from getting inside the mosque in order to minimize casualties,’ the guide said. The CAIR guide also recommends triggering alarms and calling the police as soon as possible, adding that fighting back against the attacker should be used as a last resort.”²³

Presbyterian. The Presbyterian Mission Agency of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has provided an online resource, “Developing an Emergency Plan for Violence on Church Property.”²⁴ The guidance briefly covers the following topics:

- Who Should Work on the Plan?
- Sources of Guidance
- Preparing a Plan
- Assess Where Incidents May Occur
- Assess Who Can Help
- Communications by Staff—I Am Worried About a Problem
- Communications—Internal and External
- Evacuation or Shelter in Place

²¹ “Texas Open Carry Law Statement,” The Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, Dec. 16, 2015, <https://www.txcumc.org/newsdetail/texas-open-carry-law-statement-3239269>.

²² “Best Practices for Mosque and Community Safety,” Council on American-Islamic Relations, https://pa.cair.com/files/CAIR_Mosque_Safety_Guide.pdf.

²³ Michael Boulter, “After Mass Shootings, Should Legal Guns Be Welcomed into Church?” PBS News Hour, Nov. 17, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/after-mass-shootings-should-legal-guns-be-welcomed-into-church>.

²⁴ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/legal-resources/creating-safe-ministries/developing-an-emergency-plan-for-violence-on-church-property>.

- Once Law Enforcement Arrives
- Threats of Violence
- Training and Sharing
- Where to Locate the Emergency Plan

In addition, at its 219th General Assembly in 2010, the church adopted a resolution, “Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God’s Call,” that included the following statement: “Due to the recent expanded provisions in concealed carry laws in many states that now allow guns to be carried openly, including into houses of worship, we recommend that churches and other entities prominently display signs that prohibit carrying guns onto their property.”²⁵

Unitarian Universalist. The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) has assembled security guidance on its “Building Security in Congregations” website. The UUA notes that “creating security is an ongoing process. Shocking events reported in the media can cause congregations to take immediate action on emergency and security issues, but emergency planning is a long-term process. Regularly updating plans and policies, as well as keeping the congregation informed and trained, requires consistent attention.”²⁶ Linked resources include a planning guide for active shooter incidents, developed by UUA’s Safe Congregations team and incorporating wisdom from a variety of resources;²⁷ sample active shooter emergency resources, developed by UUA congregations;²⁸ and other guides.

Q. Should congregants with concealed carry permits be authorized to carry guns into houses of worship, or should churches like schools be “gun-free zones?”

A. In the wake of recent, notorious mass shootings in houses of worship as diverse as the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, and the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, many have called for congregants to be armed in self-defense either as congregational volunteer groups or as individual concealed carry permit holders.²⁹

In 2018 and 2019, both the Maryland General Assembly and the Virginia General Assembly considered but then withdrew or defeated bills authorizing guns in houses of worship. Among the opponents of this legislation was the DC Area Interfaith Gun Violence Prevention Network,³⁰ which made the following arguments against these bills:

²⁵ “Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God’s Call,” Presbyterian Mission Agency, 2010, pp. 6-7, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/1-gun-violence-policy-2010.pdf>.

²⁶ <https://www.uua.org/safe/buildings>.

²⁷ <https://www.uua.org/safe/buildings/active-shooter>.

²⁸ <https://www.uua.org/safe/buildings/sample-policies>.

²⁹ For arguments in favor of and opposed to such armed resistance by parishioners or congregants, see, e.g., the Michael Boulter article cited in footnote 23.

³⁰ See Chapter 27 of this toolkit for a description of the Network.

- The law requires a “good and substantial reason” for carrying a loaded gun in public places like a house of worship; treating a generalized fear of violence as such a reason would undermine Virginia’s concealed carry laws.³¹
- We need sensible, responsible gun law reforms, e.g., keeping guns out of the hands of criminals, domestic abusers, teenagers, and others, not more guns in more places.
- Allowing guns in our houses of worship infringes on our First Amendment right to worship in peaceful sanctuaries.
- Our houses of worship can take less intrusive but equally effective measures to ensure their congregants’ safety, e.g., posting security guards, mounting security cameras, and training congregants how to handle emergency situations.

In 2018, an interfaith coalition of religious leaders spoke out against a Missouri house bill that would have allowed people to carry concealed weapons into houses of worship without permission from clergy, making some of the same arguments.³²

Others, however, argue that we are either already at or past the point of arming guards or congregants as possible approaches to consider in addressing the potential for gun violence in houses of worship.³³

Q. How can our house of worship apply for security grant assistance from the Federal Government?

A. Since 2005, the Nonprofit Security Grant Program (NSGP) has supported at-risk houses of worship and nonprofit organizations across the United States to acquire and install physical security enhancement equipment and inspection and screening systems intended to deter, detect, or harden structures against attack.

The NSGP program is administered through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Eligible applicants apply for the grant through their respective state homeland security agencies, who work with FEMA through the application and implementation processes. The only way to apply for the grants is through a state agency. A directory of state agencies is available on the FEMA web site.³⁴

³¹ But see the Supreme Court’s June 2022 decision in *New York State Rifle and Pistol Association v. Bruen*, holding that New York’s “proper cause” requirement for obtaining an unrestricted license to carry a concealed firearm in public is unconstitutional in that it prevents law-abiding citizens with ordinary self-defense needs from exercising their Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms.

³² Jack Jenkins, “Clergy Reject Missouri Bill on Concealed Guns in Churches,” Religion News Service, Apr. 12, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/04/12/clergy-reject-missouri-bill-on-concealed-guns-in-churches>. See also Sharlanm Farzan, “Houses of Worship Struggle to Balance Security and Belief in Wake of Violence,” National Public Radio, Feb. 9, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/09/803015711/houses-of-worship-struggle-to-balance-security-and-belief-in-wake-of-violence>.

³³ E.g., Secure Community Network, “Firearms and the Faithful: Approaches to Armed Security in Jewish Communities,” January 2020, <https://securecommunitynetwork.org/resources/institutional-safety-and-security-library/houses-of-worship/firearms-and-the-faithful>.

³⁴ <https://www.fema.gov/grants/preparedness/state-administrative-agency-contacts>.

Applicants may apply for grants up to \$150,000. The application process typically occurs once a year in the spring; the timing of the application process is established by Congress in conjunction with its completion of the annual appropriations process. For current information about the NSGP program, see the “DHS/FEMA Nonprofit Security Grant Program (NSGP) Information” website of the Secure Community Network.³⁵

Additional Resources

1. U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), “Mitigating Attacks on Houses of Worship Security Guide,” <https://www.cisa.gov/publication/mitigating-attacks-houses-worship-security-guide>
2. DHS/CISA, “Houses of Worship Security Self-Assessment,” <https://www.cisa.gov/houses-worship-security-self-assessment>.
3. DHS, Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship,” June 2013, [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Developing EOPs for Houses of Worship p FINAL.PDF](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Developing_EOPs_for_Houses_of_Worship_FINAL.PDF)
4. DHS, “Houses of Worship Security Practices Guide,” May 2013, [https://www2.illinois.gov/ready/plan/documents/dhs houses of worship security practices guide.pdf](https://www2.illinois.gov/ready/plan/documents/dhs_houses_of_worship_security_practices_guide.pdf).
5. DHS, “Safety for Faith-Based Events and Houses of Worship,” https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/17_0531_NSI_SAR-Faith-Based-Events-Houses-Worship.pdf.
6. U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Colorado, “Protecting Houses of Worship Event Resource Guide,” January 2016, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=790107>.
7. ASIS International, Cultural Properties Council, Houses of Worship Committee, “Recommended Best Practices for Securing Houses of Worship Around the World for People of All Faiths,” 2017, <https://www.asisonline.org/globalassets/get-involved/councils/documents/best-practices-securing-houses-of-worship.pdf>.
8. New Hampshire Department of Safety, Homeland Security and Emergency Management, “Houses of Worship Resources,” 2020, https://prd.blogs.nh.gov/dos/hsem/?page_id=5994.

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Photo: Memorials for the 11 victims of the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by Dmitry Brant, Oct. 31, 2018, licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

³⁵ <https://www.securecommunitynetwork.org/resources/dhs-grant-funds-information>. See also Michael H. Goldberg, “Six Things Your Congregation Needs to Know About Applying for Federal Security Grants,” Union for Reform Judaism, Nov. 15, 2018, <https://urj.org/blog/6-things-your-congregation-needs-know-about-applying-federal-security-grants>.

Resources



Chapter 25. Resources to Support Gun Violence Prevention

This chapter lists helpful books, films, articles, podcasts, and guides on the issues of gun violence and gun violence prevention, plus a comprehensive online course.

Books¹

- Thomas Abt, *Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence—and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets* (2019)
- Carol Anderson, *The Second: Race and Guns in a Fatally Unequal America* (2021)
- James E. Atwood, *America and Its Guns: A Theological Expose* (2012)
- James E. Atwood, *Gundamentalism and Where It Is Taking America* (2017)
- James E. Atwood, *Collateral Damage: Changing the Conversation about Firearms and Faith* (2019)
- Michael W. Austin, *God and Guns in America* (2020)
- Ryan Busse, *Gunfight: My Battle Against the Industry that Radicalized America* (2021)
- Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin, *Beating Guns: Hope for People Who Are Weary of Violence* (2019)
- Dave Cullen, *Parkland: Birth of a Movement* (2019)
- Dominic Erdozain, *One Nation Under Guns: How Gun Culture Distorts Our History and Threatens Our Democracy* (2024)
- Thomas Gabor, *Confronting Gun Violence in America* (2016)
- Thomas Gabor, *Enough! Solving America's Gun Violence Crisis* (2019)
- Thomas Gabor, *Carnage: Preventing Mass Shootings in America* (2021)
- Thomas Gabor and Fred Guttenberg, *American Carnage: Shattering the Myths That Fuel Gun Violence* (2023)
- Donald V. Gaffney, *Common Ground: Talking about Gun Violence in America* (2019)

¹ See also Gracie McKenzie, “27 Books to Help You Understand Gun Violence,” *The Trace*, June 5, 2023, <https://www.thetrace.org/2023/06/books-to-research-gun-violence-america>.

- Pamela Haag, *The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture* (2016)
- Thom Hartmann, *The Hidden History of Guns and the Second Amendment* (2019)
- Dennis A. Hennigan, *“Guns Don’t Kill People, People Kill People” and Other Myths about Guns and Gun Control* (2016)
- Rosalind Hughes, *Whom Shall I Fear? Urgent Questions for Christians in an Age of Violence* (2021)
- Matthew Lysiak, *Newtown: An American Tragedy* (2013)
- Lucy McBath, *Standing Our Ground: A Mother’s Story* (2018)
- Jonathan M. Metz, *What We’ve Become: Living and Dying in a Country of Arms* (2024)
- Chris Murphy, *The Violence Inside Us: A Brief History of an Ongoing American Tragedy* (2020)
- Jillian Peterson and James Densley, *The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic* (2021)
- Rev. Sharon Risher and Sherri Wood Emmons, *For Such a Time as This: Hope and Forgiveness after the Charleston Massacre* (2019)
- Robert J. Spitzer, *The Politics of Gun Control* (1995, 8th Ed. 2021)
- Robert J. Spitzer, *The Right to Bear Arms: Rights and Liberties Under the Law* (2001)
- Robert J. Spitzer, *Gun Control: A Documentary and Reference Guide* (2009)
- Robert J. Spitzer, *Guns Across America: Reconciling Gun Rules and Rights* (2015)
- Robert J. Spitzer, *The Gun Dilemma* (2022)
- Glenn Utter and Robert J. Spitzer, *Encyclopedia of Gun Control and Gun Rights* (2011)
- Shannon Watts, *Fight Like a Mother* (2019)
- Daniel W. Webster and Jon S. Vernick, eds., *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis* (2013)
- Adam Winkler, *Gun Fight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America* (2011)

Films

“Perceptions: Exploring Gun Violence” is a film and discussion series exploring the complex social, political, and economic issues contributing to gun violence in the United States. It aims to stimulate open-ended and informed discussions about gun violence in the United States. It invites different viewpoints, experiences, and perspectives about guns and gun violence from people who own guns and people who do not. Dialogue and an exchange of different opinions are key to understanding the complex problem of gun violence in America. The hope is to encourage audiences to think about practical approaches to reduce gun violence in the United States.²

² To learn more about each film, go to <https://www.perceptionsgvp.org/resources/selected-documentary-films>. The series is sponsored by a coalition of interfaith and nonprofit organizations in the D.C. [continued on next page]

Here are the films in this series:

- [*American Trauma: Why Doctors Are Taking on the NRA*](#) (2019, 10 minutes)
- [*Armed in America: Police & Guns*](#) (2016, 63 minutes)
- [*Awaken: A Tale of Inner-City Violence, Crime and Its Impact*](#) (2019, 33 minutes)
- [*Beyond the Bullet: The Cost of Gun Violence*](#) (27 minutes)
- [*DIY Gunshot Treatment on Chicago's South Side*](#) (2018, 12 minutes)
- [*Five Awake*](#) (2016, 36 minutes)
- [*Guns Found Here*](#) (2018, 11 minutes)
- [*Living for 32*](#) (2010, 40 minutes)
- [*91%: A Film About Guns in America*](#) (2016, 72 minutes)
- [*Our Philadelphia*](#) (2020, 15 minutes)
- [*Speaking Is Difficult*](#) (2016, 22 minutes)
- [*Gun Nation—America's Deadly Love Affair with Firearms*](#) (2016, 30 minutes)
- [*10-71 Shooting Aftermath*](#) (2019, 20 minutes)
- [*Trigger: The Ripple Effect of Gun Violence*](#) (2017, 55 minutes)

Other recommended films are:

- [*The Armor of Light*](#) (2015, 78 minutes). The film follows Rev. Rob Schenck, an Evangelical minister, and Rep. Lucy McBath, the mother of a teenage shooting victim, who ask, is it possible to be both pro-gun and pro-life?³
- [*Ricochet: An American Trauma*](#) (2022, 68 minutes), a PBS NewsHour Special Report. The documentary explores the three most common forms of gun violence in this country—community shootings, suicide, and mass shootings—as well as the far reach of the trauma of these events into the community.

“Deep Dive” Articles

The following are just three of multiple detailed articles that could be cited to provide a “deep dive” into the scope and complexity of the gun violence epidemic in America and solutions to confront it, if not cure it:

- Mark Berman et al., “Scope of U.S. Gun Deaths Goes Far Beyond Mass Shootings: 45,000 Fatalities in Each of Past Two Years; Increase Coincides with Record Firearm Purchases,” *The Washington Post*, July 10, 2022.⁴

area, including the DC Area Interfaith Gun Violence Prevention Network.

³ See also Rev. Schenck's essay, “Gun Violence Prevention and Evangelicals,” Chapter 3 of this toolkit.

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2022/gun-deaths-per-year-usa>.

- Donald Morrison, “Tired of Gun Deaths? Here Are 21 Ideas to Try,” *The Berkshire Eagle*, May 29, 2022.⁵
- Nicholas Kristof, “How to Reduce Shootings,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2022.⁶

Two excellent sources of articles on an ongoing basis are *The Trace*, “the only newsroom dedicated to reporting on gun violence,”⁷ and *Armed with Reason*, “a space for the gun violence prevention community to share and explore critical issues in the movement.”⁸ Readers can sign up for their newsletters, which deliver incisive articles to readers’ email inboxes.

Podcasts

- *The Gun Machine* is an eight-episode podcast series on the history of the gun industry in the United States.⁹ The podcast is a production of WBUR in Boston and *The Trace*.
- *Long Shadow: In Guns We Trust* is a six-episode podcast series exploring the evolution of America’s gun debate.¹⁰ The podcast is a production of Long Lead and Campside Media in partnership with *The Trace*.

Other GVP Resource for Faith Communities

- “God Not Guns Sabbath Worship Guide,” Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence (2007)¹¹
- “Gun Violence Prevention Laws Save Lives: Conversing with Your Congregation about Gun Violence,” Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence (2014)¹²
- “Gun Violence Prevention Toolkit,” Washington National Cathedral (2016)¹³
- “Gun Violence Prevention Congregational Toolkit,” Presbyterian Peace Fellowship (2024)¹⁴
- “Five Easy Ways to Protect Your Family, Community, and Yourself from Gun Violence,” God Before Guns (undated)¹⁵

Online Course

Johns Hopkins University offers a free, comprehensive online course, *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Evidence for Change*. The course is “designed to provide learners with the best

⁵ www.berkshireeagle.com/opinion/columnists/donald-morrison-21-solutions-if-you-are-tired-of-gun-violence/article_7d58a3ba-dd2d-11ec-9c80-638e5e1e17b6.html.

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/06/opinion/how-to-reduce-shootings.html>.

⁷ <https://www.thetrace.org>.

⁸ <https://armedwithreason.substack.com>.

⁹ <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/1108749261/the-gun-machine>.

¹⁰ <https://www.thetrace.org/projects/long-shadow-in-guns-we-trust-podcast>.

¹¹ https://www.greatplainsumc.org/files/mercy_justice/gunviolence/sabathguide_08.pdf.

¹² <https://diocesecpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/GVP-Faith-Leader-Guide-Sept2014.pdf>.

¹³ <https://cathedral.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/GunViolenceToolkit.pdf>.

¹⁴ <https://www.presbypeacefellowship.org/gun-violence/congregational-toolkit>.

¹⁵ <https://www.godbeforeguns.org/gun-safety>. Quantities of up to 500 of these gun safety cards can be obtained at no cost.

available science and insights from top scholars across the country as well as the skills to understand which interventions are the most effective to offer a path forward for reducing gun violence in our homes, schools, and communities.” For more information, including the course syllabus, visit <https://www.coursera.org/learn/gun-violence>.

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Chapter 26. Resources to Address Urban Gun Violence

Although mass shootings get much of the public's attention, the daily scourge of gun violence plagues many of our cities and leaves grief and generational trauma in its wake. Urban gun violence is complex but can be addressed to save lives. Urban gun violence is being fought through city government funding of programs, education of the public, support of youth and families, violence interrupters, and programs to address police violence. This chapter highlights a few resources available for addressing urban gun violence.

Everytown for Gun Safety

Everytown for Gun Safety provides information, tools, and funding for communities dealing with gun violence. As Everytown explains, urban gun violence

disproportionately impacts historically underfunded neighborhoods, which reflects and amplifies this country's long-standing systemic and structural inequities. For decades, community-based organizations have successfully reduced violence by implementing alternative public safety measures that are locally driven and informed by data. Often referred to as violence intervention programs, these strategies have expanded greatly over the years and include street outreach, group violence intervention, crime prevention through environmental design, hospital-based violence intervention programs, safe passage programs, and cognitive behavioral therapy.¹

Everytown's "Violence Intervention Programs" page provides links to numerous resources for understanding and addressing the problem of gun violence in cities.² These include the "City

¹ "Community-Led Public Safety Strategies," Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, Oct. 15, 2020, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/community-led-public-safety-strategies>. The paper goes on to explain each of these strategies.

² "Violence Intervention Programs," Everytown for Gun Safety, undated, <https://www.everytown.org/solutions/violence-intervention-programs>.

Gun Violence Reduction Insight Portal,”³ which allows city officials to “create a custom blueprint for gun violence reduction for your city.”⁴

Cure the Streets

Cure the Streets (CTS) is an example of a government-sponsored violence interruption program. Launched by the Office of the Attorney General for the District of Columbia, CTS “operates in discrete high violence neighborhoods using a data-driven, public-health approach to gun violence by treating it as a disease that can be interrupted, treated, and stopped from spreading.”⁵ CTS is working to reduce violence in three ways:⁶

Interrupting potentially violent conflicts: CTS Violence Interrupters are hired for their credibility, relationships, and influence within targeted neighborhoods and trained to resolve conflicts. Interrupters engage with the community to learn about brewing conflicts and resolve them peaceably before they erupt in violence. If a shooting does occur, CTS works with those affected by the incident to prevent retaliation. CTS also organizes rallies or vigils when shootings occur to ensure that violence is not normalized.

Identifying and treating high-risk individuals: CTS Outreach Workers recruit and work with individuals at high risk for involvement with violence in order to reduce their risk factors. Workers meet with program participants several times a week to implement individualized risk reduction plans. They also help connect participants with needed services, such as housing, counseling, and employment assistance, and develop action plans for a positive future.

Mobilizing the community to change norms: CTS engages with residents, community leaders, local businesses, faith leaders, service providers, and high-risk individuals to build coalitions and develop strategies to reduce violence. CTS works with these partners to organize forums and public events where residents can gather and interact safely without fear of conflict and violence.

The T.R.I.G.G.E.R. Project

The True Reasons I Grabbed the Gun Evolved from Risks (T.R.I.G.G.E.R.) Project is an example of a community-based gun violence prevention program. It aims to denormalize gun violence in communities of color across the nation by listening to those most affected—not just the victims of gun violence, but also those who pulled the trigger.⁷

³ “City Gun Violence Reduction Insight Portal,” Everytown for Gun Safety, <https://citygrip.org>.

⁴ See also “Breaking the Cycle of Gun Violence Through Community Intervention,” a webinar cosponsored by the GVP Group at Temple Sinai (Washington, DC), June 16, 2022—flyer available at <https://bit.ly/breaking-the-cycle-webinar>; recording available at <https://vimeo.com/722582170/7cd3dfdb09>.

⁵ “Cure the Streets: OAG’s Violence Interruption Program,” Office of the Attorney General for the District of Columbia, <https://oag.dc.gov/public-safety/cure-streets-oags-violence-interruption-program>.

⁶ The three paragraphs that follow in the text are taken from “Cure the Streets One Pager,” undated, <https://oag.dc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-02/Cure-the-Streets-One-Pager-FINAL.pdf>.

⁷ The T.R.I.G.G.E.R. Project, <https://thetriggerproject.org>.

As explained by its founder, Tia Bell, “We need to no longer dismiss our shooters and the perpetrators and the 2 percent of the population who’s inflicting this pain—because there are reasons why they’re doing this. If our opportunities and resources combat those reasons, we give them an alternative.”⁸ The project uses a public health lens to find out what factors make someone more likely to pick up a gun, including exposure to violence, abuse, and low economic opportunity.

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Photo: Operation Ceasefire NJ March, by B.C. Lorio, Mar. 28, 2015, licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#).

⁸ Anna Liss-Roy, “City Leaders, Activists Unite in Conference to End Gun Violence in DC,” WUSA9, <https://bit.ly/city-leaders-activists>.



Chapter 27. DC Area Interfaith Gun Violence Prevention Network

The D.C. Area Interfaith Gun Violence Prevention Network (Interfaith GVP Network) was founded in 2017 by the GVP Ministry of the Washington National Cathedral and the Temple Sinai (DC) GVP Group. It is a coalition of volunteers from churches, synagogues, and temples in the DMV area most active on gun violence prevention. They have agreed to receive and disseminate information to congregants, clergy, and others interested in working to prevent and reduce gun violence. Faith traditions represented in the Interfaith GVP Network include Baptist, Catholic, Congregational (United Church of Christ), Episcopalian, Evangelical, Jewish, Methodist, Muslim, Presbyterian, Quaker, and Unitarian. New members and denominations are always welcome to join the Network.

Many caring people of faith want to do what they can to end gun violence. Some houses of worship with volunteers in the Network are more active than others, collaborating, for example, to host panel discussions, participate in education campaigns, arrange for outdoor displays in memory of those killed by guns, or turn out to support sensible federal or state gun safety legislation or oppose harmful gun laws. Some work with national groups such as Giffords, the Brady Campaign, and Everytown for Gun Safety. Others work with state and local GVP groups or organizations such as Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence, area chapters of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, and the northern Virginia chapter of the Brady Campaign. Our Network provides a chance to partner with others, share information, reach out for advice, or simply keep abreast of the many opportunities to join in the effort to stop gun violence.

GVP initiatives that many of us support:

- Universal background checks (to cover all gun sales, including private sales)
- Banning civilian sale of military-style assault weapons and high-capacity magazines
- Safe (locked) storage of guns, especially in households where there are children under 18
- Conducting gun “buybacks” to get out of the community deadly handguns, rifles, shotguns, assault weapons, and “ghost guns”
- Increased funds for research on gun violence at the federal and state levels
- Extreme Risk Protection Orders, aka “red flag” laws, to allow law enforcement, family, and others to remove guns temporarily from a person deemed by a court to be a threat to self or others
- Removing guns from those convicted of domestic abuse.

Our members do not support:

- Guns in houses of worship
- Campus carry (guns on the campuses of public universities and colleges)
- Arming teachers

For more information and to join the Interfaith Network, please contact any of the co-chairs:

- Susan Bender, Chair, GVP Ministry, Bethesda United Methodist Church, Bethesda, MD, susanbender@comcast.net
- Christina Files, Member, GVP Ministry, St. John’s Episcopal Church, Chevy Chase, MD, anglofiles1@gmail.com
- Steve Klitzman, Chair, Temple Sinai GVP Group, Washington, DC, steve.klitzman@gmail.com
- Robert More, Coordinator, Pax Christi, St. John Neumann Catholic Church, Reston, VA, rmore.paxchristi@gmail.com