



Gun Safety Saves Lives

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In the aftermath of the killings at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, TX and other mass shootings, Congress passed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA). This legislation, supported by the League of Women Voters of the United States, limits access to guns for those who have been convicted of domestic violence in a dating relationship, creates federal straw purchasing and trafficking criminal offenses, allowing prosecutors to address dangerous illegal gunrunners.

In addition to these two features, the League recommended the following actions in a letter to the Senate and House Judiciary Committees: (1) closing the gun show loophole which exempts certain sales from the requirement of a federal background check of the buyer of a weapon, (2) providing universal background checks, (3) banning assault weapons and placing limits on high-capacity ammunition magazine size, and (4) funding research and reporting on gun violence in the United States.

BSCA draws attention to the argument that mental health is an issue in gun violence, providing support for state “red flag” laws that are intended to keep guns out of the hands of those whom a court has found to be a significant danger to themselves or others. Another feature is an enhanced background check for a gun purchaser under the age of 21, including review of juvenile and mental health records. Other provisions support expansion of mental health services for children and families and for mental health services in schools. While support for mental health is much needed, especially as a result of the stresses associated with the pandemic, researchers indicate that lack of access to mental health services has been a small factor in explaining gun violence.

Gun safety is of particular interest in New Mexico where deaths from firearms have increased over the last decade and the rate of gun deaths relative to population is among the highest in the nation. Moreover, NMSU Public Health Professor Jagdish Khubchandani found that firearm deaths for residents 19 and younger in New Mexico rose 45% between 2010 and 2019, before the 2020 surge.

Gun violence is increasingly viewed as a public health issue, which has long-term consequences for those who survive gun-related injuries, their families, and their communities. Those consequences can involve physical disabilities and chronic mental health issues. There can also be a substantial economic impact including loss of productivity.

What are possible solutions? Some people say, “Good guys with guns are the answer.” This goal often leads to dangerous unintended consequences. The percentage of shots fired by police officers striking a suspect is rarely better than 50%. Beyond police officers in high stress fearful situations, people with guns make mistakes.

What other actions can contribute to solving this problem? New Mexicans to Prevent Gun Violence, a nonprofit organization, is providing training to better acquaint law enforcement officers with the state’s “red flag” law, which has been used relatively little in the two years since it was passed. It is essential that gun owners keep guns locked when not being appropriately used and communities can develop violence intervention programs. Limitations on economic and educational opportunities also need to be addressed. Greater access to community colleges and universities through the Opportunity Scholarships and the efforts by the City of Las Cruces to lift up neighborhoods may help.

The League of Women Voters will continue to seek comprehensive reforms to save lives and reduce violence in our communities.

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