

Testimony in support of SB551

Purpose: require every school district to distribute and publish information about the secure storage of firearms and medications.

It should be a critical concern for all of us that there are millions of children in our country at risk for firearm death or injury for one reason. That one reason is that there is at least one unsecured gun in their own home. The number of these unsecured guns has seen a recent and alarming surge. Firearms are the leading cause of death for American children and teens.¹ Research shows that these storage practices can play a vital role in reducing the risk of gun violence for children due to unintentional shootings and gun suicides.² This gun violence should be common ground for all of us and should be recognized as a public health emergency. As with all public health crises, we must examine the causes and educate about these causes in order to protect our children and ourselves in our schools and our homes. We must learn from the statistics that tell us that unintentional shootings, suicides, gun violence on school grounds and homicides are all more likely to happen when there are unsecured guns in a home or car or any other building on our property. We have taken an important step in Oregon to enact a safe storage law that requires the owner or possessor of a firearm to secure their firearm(s). And we took another step with Senate Bill 554 to allow local school authorities to create new "gun-free zones". These are commendable strategies but the risks for our children are so high that it is time to take another step to assure that secure storage of guns becomes actual practice to save lives.

I will quote many statistics in this testimony but please, take the time to read all of them if you are not yet assured that we must recognize the overwhelming costs of unsecured weapons in our homes. How do we compare to other countries as we care for our children? Globally a study of 195 countries showed that the rate of unintentional firearm deaths in the United States is the same as that rate for the 195 countries **combined**. This must be repeated: accidental gun death rate in the US is equal to the total rate of 195 other countries.³ The unintentional firearm death rate in the United States is four times higher than that of the other high-income countries⁴ In comparison to many other countries, we are clearly failing to protect our children from largely preventable death and injury.

There is also clear evidence of an unprecedented surge in firearm purchases in the last three years.^{5,6} A survey study reported in Journal of the American Medical Association in April 2021 shows us how children are increasingly at risk.⁷ In 2015, one-third of all households with children contained firearms, 21% of which contained at least 1 firearm that was both loaded and unlocked. This means that approximately 4.6 million children lived in a home with loaded and unlocked firearms.⁸ The situation is now worse. In

comparison, in April 2021, approximately 30 million children lived in households with firearms, 7 million more than in 2015. Firearm owners with children were only slightly less likely to have firearms that were both loaded and unlocked (15.0% vs 21%) in 2021. The conclusion of the 2021 study of was to “underscore the ongoing need for more effective efforts to reduce children’s exposure to unsafely stored firearms, especially considering recent increases in new firearm owners, including those with children”.^{5,6,7,8}

Access to guns is reflected in the increasing rates of violence we see in schools. Everytown for Gun Safety collects information on an ongoing basis on all incidents where a gun was discharged in or onto a school’s campus or grounds, using news reports from reputable media sources and verifying these incidents with an independent research firm. From an average of 49 incidents in every school year since 2013, this past school year saw 193 incidents of gunfire on the grounds of preschools and K–12 schools.

Unintentional shootings happen to children of all ages but have common risk factors. In homes with guns, the likelihood of accidental death by shooting is four times higher. More than a third of all unintentional shootings of children take place in the homes of their friends, neighbors or relatives. Between 2015 and 2020, there were at least 2,070 unintentional shootings by children that resulted in 765 deaths and 1,366 nonfatal gun injuries. Every year, nearly 350 children under the age of 18 unintentionally shoot themselves or someone else. This equates to one unintentional shooting per day, and nearly 77 percent of these incidents take place inside a home.⁹ Playing with the gun is the most common scenario in an unintentional shooting especially for younger victims. A majority of unintentional firearms deaths for children ages 0 to 9 occur when they or someone else are playing with the gun. The groups at highest risk in unintentional shootings however are older children and teens, ages 10 to 19.¹⁰

Kids and adolescents are at an increased risk for suicide when there is a gun in the home too. Suicide rates in this population are four times higher than for kids who live in homes without guns. In the past decade, 40% of the suicides committed by kids and teens involved guns. Nine out of 10 of these suicides were with guns that the victims accessed at their own homes or from a relative's home.¹¹

The report “Protecting America’s Schools A US. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence”¹² tells us that active shooters on school grounds are often connected to the school. Guns used in school-based violence generally come from the shooter’s home or the homes of family or friends. When it comes to school shootings, there are nearly always advance indications. These warning signs, if appropriately identified, can offer an opportunity for intervention. In the study of incidents from 2008 to 2017, 100

percent of the perpetrators showed concerning behaviors, and that 77 percent of the time at least one person, most often a peer, knew about their plan. Prevention is possible in these cases, but only when there are adequate levels of awareness of the warning signs, an established safety plan to deal with a crisis and an established practice of safe storage.

We have a personal example of how the politicization of gun rights is impacting safety in schools. Our grandchildren attend an otherwise absolutely exemplary school and I am there four days a week. The school safety plan does not address gun safety and there is no public indication that the school could be a gun-free sanctuary or that all guns in the homes of these children should be safely stored. Our children deserve better but apparently it may take legislation for this school to support the adoption of safe storage practices.

In all these situations, in our home, our schools, our children's friends' homes the risk of unsecured guns is resulting in daily deaths that are preventable and it is past time to take action. We had to learn and legislate the practice of seatbelt/carseat/backseats for our children when it was clear that the development of modern motor vehicles could result in so many children's deaths when they were unsecured- a public health issue. The American Academy of Pediatrics has demonstrated leadership in an educational role, acknowledging the urgency of this public health risk and recommending that pediatricians address firearm safety as part of its routine care for families with children of all ages. It is also time for schools to address gun violence with this public health approach. We must leave politics aside and expect our schools to distribute and publish information about the secure storage of firearms.

Thank you for your consideration and support of this bill.

Dr. Steven and Jean Carlton

- 1) CDC, WONDER, Underlying Cause of Death, Injury Mechanism & All Other Leading Causes, 2021. Ages 1–19.
- 2) Michael C. Monuteaux, Deborah Azrael, and Matthew Miller, “Association of Increased Safe Household Firearm Storage with Firearm Suicide and Unintentional Death Among US Youths,” *JAMA Pediatrics* 173, no. 7 (2019): 657–62.
- 3) The Global Burden of Disease 2016 Injury Collaborators. Global Mortality From Firearms, 1990–2016. *JAMA*. 2018;320(8):792–814.
- 4) Grinshteyn E, Hemenway D. Violent death rates in the US compared to those in the other high-income countries. *Prev Med*. 2019; Jun;123:20–6.
- 5) Crifasi CK, Ward JA, McGinty EE, Webster DW, Barry CL. Gun purchasing behaviours during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, March to mid-July 2020. *Int Rev Psychiatry*. 2021;33(7):593-597.
doi:10.1080/09540261.2021.1901669
- 6) Miller M, Zhang W, Azrael D. Firearm purchasing during the COVID-19 pandemic: results from the 2021 National Firearms Survey. *Ann Intern Med*. Published online December 21, 2021. doi:10.7326/M21-3423
- 7) Firearm Storage in US Households With Children Findings From the 2021 National Firearm Survey Matthew Miller, MD, ScD1,2; Deborah Azrael, PhD2 *JAMA Netw Open*. 2022;5(2):e2148823. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.48823
- 8) Azrael D, Cohen J, Salhi C, Miller M. Firearm storage in gun-owning households with children: results of a 2015 national survey. *J Urban Health*. 2018;95(3):295-304. doi:10.1007/s11524-018-0261-7.
- 9) Everytown for Gun Safety. “#NotAnAccident Index”. Everytown for Gun Safety. (2019). everytownresearch.org/notanaccident
- 10) Solnick, S.J., Hemenway, D. Unintentional firearm deaths in the United States 2005–2015. *Inj. Epidemiol.* 6, 42 (2019).
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40621-019-0220-0>.
- 11) Access to Firearms Increases Child and Adolescent Suicide June 5 2020. Society for Research in Child Development. Matthew Miller, M.D., M.P.H., Sc.D., Bouvé College of Health Sciences, Northeastern University, Deborah Azrael, Ph.D., Harvard Injury Control Research Center, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Harvard University.
- 12) PROTECTING AMERICA’S SCHOOLS A U.S. SECRET SERVICE ANALYSIS OF TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE. 2019. U.S. Department of Homeland Security UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE National Threat Assessment Center.

