

February 6, 2019

Re: Hearing of the House Committee of the Judiciary on Gun Violence Prevention.

On behalf of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), we are pleased to submit this testimony regarding the importance of enacting policy that will prevent gun violence in our country. NASP represents 25,000 school psychologists who work with students, families, educators, administrators, and community members to ensure that every student feels safe and supported at school. We are a nonpartisan association committed to advocating for research-based policies and practices that ensure children's safety, well-being, and ability to thrive at school, at home, and throughout life. Our work is grounded in our mission, professional standards, position statements, resolutions, policies, and advocacy platforms, all of which are guided by research. NASP aspires to protect children from gun violence by encouraging and supporting solutions that create safer, healthier schools, homes, and communities and reduce gun violence in all its forms.

Gun violence in our country is a public health crisis. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly 34,000 people die as a result of gun violence each year, approximately two thirds of which are the result of suicide. CDC data also show that for every person killed by gun violence, two more people are injured (CDC, 2017), and that the rate of gun deaths increased notably in 2016 (Ahmad & Bastian, 2017). The rate of firearm-related deaths (homicide, suicide, unintentional deaths) in United States is 10 times higher than other high income countries, and, for youth ages 15–24, the gun homicide rate is 49 times higher than in other countries (Grinshteyn & Hemenway, 2016); These numbers are unacceptable. Too many people are dying from firearms and many more children and youth experience the adverse effects of exposure to gun violence. We call upon Congress to enact meaningful policy that will reverse these trends.

Exposure to gun violence in the community can result in anxiety, depression, antisocial behavior, and a decline in students' capacity to meaningfully engage in academic tasks (Garbarino, Bradshaw, & Vorrasi, 2002; Sharkey, Tirado-Strayer, Papachristos, & Raver, 2012). While there is a complex interaction of risk factors, warning signs, barriers, and mental states that leads to violence (Reeves & Brock, 2017), access to firearms is highly associated with increased risk of injury and death among youth (Hemenway, 2011; Siegel, Ross, & King, 2013) and exposure to gun violence is highly associated with diminished social, emotional, and academic well-being (Garbarino, Bradshaw, & Vorrasi, 2002; Heinze, Stoddard, Aiyer, Eisman, & Zimmerman, 2017; Kirk & Hardy, 2014). Further, multiple research studies have shown a clear connection between local availability of guns and gun-related violent behaviors. Nearly 2 million children and adolescents have access to loaded, unlocked guns in their homes (Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, 2012). Having a gun stored in the home is associated with a threefold increase in homicide and a fivefold increase in suicide in urban areas in the United States (Kellerman et al., 1992, 1993). Although gun violence in schools is extremely rare, research indicates that the majority of youth homicides are by a firearm, nearly half of youth suicide deaths involve the use of a gun, and most school-associated homicides involved a firearm (CDC, 2014; Modzeleski et al., 2008); We must do more to reduce the overall access to weapons, especially among those who are at risk of harming themselves or others, and enact and vigorously enforce safe gun storage laws so that children and youth do not have inappropriate access to weapons.

Congress has the responsibility to balance the Second Amendment with reasonable and meaningful gun laws. In fact, research demonstrates that gun laws that restrict access to high-powered weapons that are capable of mass destruction in a short period of time reduce gun related deaths. Additionally, states with safe storage and red flag laws have seen a decrease in gun violence. These laws work and it is time for Congress to take this epidemic seriously and pass meaningful reforms.

In addition to addressing firearm related policy, Congress must continue to work toward improving the mental and behavioral health system in this country so that we can identify those that may be at risk of harming themselves or others and intervene early. We must also continue to encourage policies that do not exacerbate the stigma that exists among people with mental and behavioral health issues. Longitudinal research has concluded that the vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent (Elbogen & Johnson, 2009). In fact, less than 5% of the gun-related killings in the United States were perpetrated by people diagnosed with mental illness. Addressing the mental and behavioral health of children, youth, and adults is a necessary part of a comprehensive strategy for reducing school and community violence, but it is not a substitute for enacting meaningful gun laws.

NASP supports approaches that protect children, as they are particularly vulnerable when it comes to gun violence both as direct victims and through trauma from the exposure to the deaths of family members, friends, neighbors, and community members. These approaches include: rigorous enforcement of existing gun laws; eliminating inappropriate youth access to guns; improving awareness of safe gun practices, including secure storage of firearms; restricting the presence of guns in schools to only commissioned and trained school resource officers; and ensuring greater protection to keep guns out of the hands of individuals deemed at risk of hurting themselves and others. As such we encourage Congress to swiftly pass legislation that:

- Requires comprehensive background checks for all gun purchases.
- Utilizes extreme risk protection orders that allow family members or police officers (when notified by school/family or when responding to an incident) to petition the court to remove someone's access to weapons when they are deemed a threat to self or others.
- Bans all weapons that can do mass destruction in a short period of time (e.g., fully automatic assault weapons).
- Promotes evidence-based threat assessment policy and practice; mental health evaluations and re-entry plans, including ongoing mental and behavioral health support for students identified as being of imminent threat to themselves or others; and enhanced student access to mental health supports in schools and communities.
- Complete elimination of the Dickey Amendment, which prohibits the use of federal funds to conduct comprehensive scientific research about gun violence, combined with increased investments for rigorous research on gun violence.
- Prohibits federal funds from being used to arm teachers or other school personnel



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Thank you for your commitment to considering meaningful actions to prevent gun violence in this country. Keeping our children safe, and protecting their physical, emotional and psychological well-being, is perhaps our most fundamental responsibility as a nation. We cannot fulfill this responsibility without seriously addressing the gun violence epidemic. We look forward to working with Congress to do so. Please contact Kelly Vaillancourt Strobach, NASP Director of Policy and Advocacy with any questions ([kvaillancourt@naspweb.org](mailto:kvaillancourt@naspweb.org)).

Sincerely,

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Executive Director