



**AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION**
SERVICES, INC.

Testimony Submitted March 23, 2021
American Psychological Association Services, Inc.
to the
United States Senate
Committee on the Judiciary

Full Committee Hearing: Constitutional and Common Sense Steps to Reduce Gun Violence

On behalf of the American Psychological Association, we submit this statement for the record for the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on Constitutional and Common Sense Steps to Reduce Gun Violence on March 23, 2021. APA is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States with more than 122,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants, and students. Our association advocates for a public health approach to gun violence prevention, supporting evidence-based programs and policies that can reduce the occurrence and impact of firearm-related violence in the United States.

APA supports H.R. 8 / S.529 the Bipartisan Background Checks Act of 2021. This important legislation would address our nation's gun violence public health crisis by closing pre-existing loopholes that allow unlicensed gun sellers to avoid comprehensive background checks on firearms sales. APA's *Resolution on Firearm Violence Research and Prevention*ⁱ affirms the importance of background checks. Moreover, research demonstrates almost 80% of all firearms acquired for criminal purposes are obtained through transfers from unlicensed sellers,ⁱⁱ and 96% of persons incarcerated for gun offenses who were already prohibited from possessing a firearm at the time of the offense obtained their firearm from an unlicensed seller. Another study found states that only require background checks on sales through federally licensed firearms dealers showed higher rates of adolescents who carry guns than states that require universal background checks on all prospective gun buyers.ⁱⁱⁱ

Importantly, APA is supportive of efforts in Congress to fund lethal means safety options including safe firearms storage. A recent study affirmed that increased safe firearms storage could reduce firearm suicide and unintentional firearm fatalities among youth by up to 32%.^{iv} Moreover, research demonstrate about 90% of individuals contemplating suicide by firearm will not choose another lethal mean (e.g. pills, knives, etc.) if the firearm is unavailable.^v Simply put, safe firearms storage is crucial to preventing unintentional injuries and self-harm and it is incumbent upon Congress to provide the funding necessary to educate firearms owners and provide these life-saving storage options.

Moreover, psychologists play a key role in community-based, crisis intervention teams (CITs) and mental health response teams (MHRTs) that work to safely deal with situations involving individuals in mental health crisis who are at risk of harming themselves or others. Tailored by each community to fit local needs, these teams unite the efforts of police officers, mental health educators and community advocates to resolve potentially violent situations in positive ways. The teams promote de-escalation practices to achieve better outcomes including reducing arrests^{vi} and increasing the number of individuals seeking mental health treatment.^{vii} APA urges Congress to make additional resources available for communities to invest in CITs and MHRTs to help prevent incidents of gun violence.

APA also urges Congressional support for state efforts to implement Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPOs) laws. Research demonstrates that states with ERPO laws have lower gun-related suicide rates.^{viii} Almost 80% of individuals suffering from suicidal thoughts show warning signs.^{ix} These laws can help these persons in mental health crisis by providing communities with an opportunity to petition the courts to intervene, and temporarily remove a firearm if the person is a possible risk to themselves or others without legal repercussions.



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Thank you for holding this important hearing to prevent gun violence tragedies. If you have any questions, please contact Ben Vonachen, Senior Director of Congressional and Federal Relations at bvonachen@apa.org.

ⁱ APA Resolution on Firearm Violence Research and Prevention (2014), <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/firearms>

ⁱⁱ Katherine A. Vittes, Jon S. Vernick, and Daniel W. Webster, "Legal Status and Source of Offenders' Firearms in States with the Least Stringent Criteria for Gun Ownership," *Injury Prevention* 19, no. 1 (2013): 26-31

ⁱⁱⁱ Lava R. Timsina, Nan Qiao, Alejandro C. Mongalo, Ashley N. Vetor, Aaron E. Carroll and Teresa M. Bell, "National Instant Criminal Background Check and Youth Gun Carrying" *Pediatrics* January 2020, 145 (1) e20191071; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-1071>

^{iv} Monuteaux, Michael C., 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 (January 2019): 657.

^v Anestis, M. D., Houtsma, C., Daruwala, S. E., & Butterworth, S. E. (2019). Firearm legislation and statewide suicide rates: The moderating role of household firearm ownership levels. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 37, 270-280. DOI: 10.1002/bsl.2408

^{vi} Franz, S & Borum, R (2010). Crisis Intervention Teams may prevent arrests of people with mental illnesses. *Police Practice and Research*, Vol. 12, Issue 3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2010.497664>

^{vii} Broner, N., Lattimore, P.K., Cowell, A.J., & Schlenger, W.E. (2004). Effects of diversion on adults with co-occurring mental illness and substance use: outcomes from a national multi-site study. *Behavioral Science Law*: 22(4):519-41. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15282838/>

^{viii} Anestis, M. D., Houtsma, C., Daruwala, S. E., & Butterworth, S. E. (2019). Firearm legislation and statewide suicide rates: The moderating role of household firearm ownership levels. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 37, 270-280. DOI: 10.1002/bsl.2408

^{ix} Hollaway, K. J. (2007). Golden, R. N., & Peterson, F. L. (2010). *The truth about illness and disease*. New York: Facts On File