



March 22, 2021

Senator Richard J. Durbin
Chair
United State Senate Committee on the Judiciary
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chair Durbin,

On behalf of the Big Cities Health Coalition (BCHC), we submit this statement for the record for the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on Constitutional and Common Sense Steps to Reduce Gun Violence on March 23, 2021. BCHC is made up of health officials leading 30 of the nation's largest metropolitan health departments, who together serve nearly 62 million, or one-in-five, Americans. BCHC believes that gun violence and associated trauma are a public health crisis, and that Congress must enact meaningful legislation to help prevent and reduce gun violence in our communities.

BCHC supports the enactment of common sense gun laws that reduce access, particularly among youth and those most at risk of harming themselves or others, such as:

- Comprehensive background checks, including those sold at gun shows;
- Enhanced prosecution for those found with guns purchased illegally;
- Access to safe and secure firearm storage among those who own legal guns;
- Banning the sale, transfer, importation, and manufacture of assault weapons and large capacity ammunition magazines; and
- Adopting "red flag laws" that permit law enforcement, friends or family members to petition a court to issue an "extreme risk protection" or "gun violence restraining" order if they consider a person to pose a significant threat to themselves or others.

In addition, we support other public health investments to support strategies and data collection to aid in reducing gun violence:

- Strengthen funding and other policy mechanisms that support community prevention, as well as implementation of violence interruption and trauma informed approaches that are proven to work.
- Create a CDC-led comprehensive, multisector response to violence that addresses social, emotional, and mental health in addition to physical health in partnership with local public health agencies;
- Provide increased funds to the CDC for practical firearm prevention research; and
- Implement and fully fund a nationwide infrastructure to collect a key set of indicators regarding community violence, and identify indicators that measure community resilience.

Specifically, we urge the Senate to adopt the House passed Bipartisan Background Checks Act (H.R. 8). The Senate companion bill is the Background Check Expansion Act (S. 529).

In 2019, 39,707 people died from gun violence. Tragically, the pandemic and resulting economic fallout may further exacerbate this public health crisis. Experts have suggested that the pandemic may drive increases in suicides, domestic violence, and community violence in the coming years. Several loopholes in federal law – and the background check system in particular – are not sufficient to prevent individuals who are ineligible to own a firearm from purchasing one. The Bipartisan Background Checks Act/Background Check Expansion Act would enact universal background checks, closing these dangerous loopholes by ensuring that a background check happens on every firearms sale.

A public health approach to preventing violence and building safer, more resilient communities acknowledges structural racism and other forms of discrimination. Crucially important to this approach is an acknowledgement that the current situation – in which communities of color face concentrated policing, fewer opportunities and deteriorated community conditions – isn't just happenstance. Nor was it the fault of community members themselves. These conditions were created by policies and practices that have marginalized people of color and poor people into neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage.

As such, we need systems put in place that will protect our communities from the trauma of gun violence. Since 1993, the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) has conducted firearm background checks on gun purchasers. Federally licensed dealers must run a check through NICS to determine whether a potential buyer is prohibited from purchasing firearms.

However, no background check is required for sales at gun shows, through online marketplaces, or between private individuals. Individuals who would otherwise be prohibited from purchasing or possessing a gun can easily buy guns through such unregulated sales. And, the frequency of these unregulated sales is concerning: recent studies indicate that approximately 22 percent of firearms are purchased without a background check and up to 80 percent of firearms used in crimes are obtained without a background check.

The Bipartisan Background Checks Act/Background Check Expansion Act would require a background check on every sale, ensuring that people prohibited from purchasing firearms cannot exploit loopholes and purchase guns through an unregulated sale at a gun show, online, or from an unlicensed seller. In addition, individuals would no longer be able to cross state lines solely to purchase a firearm in a state with less stringent background checks.

Too often, our communities bear witness to the terrible tragedies that occur when people use guns to harm themselves or others. Gun violence is a complex public health issue that will require a comprehensive solution. Enacting universal background checks is an important next step, along with strengthening community based violence prevention work, such as violence interruption and trauma informed approaches, which have been shown to work. We also need to re-build our systems and policies to make them more equitable across the board.

BCHC's support for universal background checks and other common sense gun laws comes from our desire to prevent violence and build safer, more resilient communities. We thank you for holding this important hearing to discuss concrete ways to reduce gun violence in our communities. Please do not hesitate to contact Chrissie Juliano, MPP, Executive Director, BCHC, at juliano@bigcitieshealth.org.