

**Questions for the record from Senator Charles E. Grassley
Hearing on “Protecting America’s Children from Gun Violence”
June 15, 2022**

Dr. Moira Szilagyi

President

American Academy of Pediatrics

Los Angeles, California

1. You testified that children with intra-family tension and adversity are more prone to mental health instability and acts of violence. Would you agree that establishing healthy, intact family structures would help reduce a child’s potential for violence?

Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships are so important for children. These relationships help build resilience and buffer adversity. As I testified, childhood adversity and trauma (such as child abuse and neglect, frequent bullying, or high levels of community violence), especially in the absence of safe, stable, and nurturing family relationships, can lead to a biological response called toxic stress. Toxic stress changes the brain in ways that increases the child’s perception of danger while reducing the ability of our higher brain structures to regulate emotions and behaviors, which in some cases may result in a predisposition to violence.

2. According to the Violence Project, more than two thirds of school shooters had a history of mental health issues and more than 80% showed signs and behavior consistent with a mental health crises prior to carrying out their shootings. Would you agree mental health care plays a role in reducing mass shootings?

Mental illness and childhood trauma does play a role in mass shooting. While mental illness and trauma are not synonymous, but they can be related. As I testified, caring for children in a way that acknowledges trauma will be a critical element in preventing future tragedies like Uvalde. We need to identify children who are experiencing or have experienced trauma and are at heightened risk of committing violence. Two researchers conducted a study about perpetrators of mass shootings from 1966 to 2019 and found that 100% had a history of childhood trauma (child abuse or neglect, emotional abuse, being bullied, exposure to significant violence). Research has also shown that childhood trauma can lead to activation and dysregulation of the body’s stress responses in ways that alter brain structure and function. The brain of a traumatized individual is wired to scan for danger and has less capacity for emotional and behavioral regulation. We need to identify

affected children and engage them in a trauma-informed way, get them the care they need, and make sure they cannot access firearms. Trauma-informed care and mental health care can play a role in preventing mass shootings, but it is not sufficient by itself. I feel strongly that we need to do more to keep lethal weapons away from those who could do harm.

3. COVID lockdowns have had a profoundly negative effect on the mental health of America's youth. In one of the recent mass shootings, 18 year-old Payton Gendron indicated that his isolation during COVID lockdowns in New York led in great part to his mental health struggles.
 - a. Is there a mental health effect to the lockdowns and isolation that has accompanied the pandemic? If so, how pervasive is it?

We were dealing with a child mental health crisis prior to the pandemic and unfortunately the pandemic exacerbated it. Social isolation can be detrimental to children, which is why the AAP spoke up clearly about the importance of keeping children in school whenever possible during the pandemic. While I don't believe that the pandemic caused the mental health emergency we are currently experiencing, it has certainly had an impact and more research is needed to better understand this relationship and its magnitude.