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## Editorial

# Nurses and Gun Violence Prevention: Protecting the Public's Health

It is startling but not shocking to learn that 99.8% of Americans know someone who has been impacted by gun violence (Kalesan et al., 2016). Gun violence prevention advocacy is in my DNA. I inherited the impact of generational trauma from my father, who was orphaned at 12 years of age by one of the first mass shootings in this country. On September 6, 1949, my father was a terrified 12-year-old boy hiding in a closet as his entire family, including his mother, father, and grandmother, were murdered, along with 10 other people, by a hostile neighbor with a semiautomatic weapon.

My father may have physically survived the killings, but he was traumatized all his remaining days. Ironically, my father was buried on September 6, 2009, the 60th anniversary of the murders.

Almost 70 years after my father's tragedy, my niece was a senior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. On February 14, 2018, she, along with 17 classmates and a brave teacher, huddled in a closet inside their classroom for more than two hours until they were freed by the SWAT team as another mass murder unfolded on their campus. Seventeen students and staff were killed, 15 were injured, and the Parkland, Florida, community was terrorized and traumatized. Tragically, my family's story of generational trauma is no longer a rare outlier; in fact today, young people have lived through two mass shootings within several years, rather than generations apart (Bosman et al., 2023).

## Prevention Strategies

### Advocacy

As a school nurse in Camden, New Jersey, and a family member of both survivors and victims of

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two mass shootings over three generations, I am a relentless gun violence prevention advocate through a public health lens. Nursing, as the largest group of health care professionals in the country, has a yet unrealized, profound impact on gun violence prevention strategies. Our clearly focused strategies must advocate for policy change on a macro level, and through deliberately structured, ground-level conversations with students, patients, families, and communities, influence change on an individual level.

Gun violence is a public health crisis that affects individuals and communities across the United States. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), firearm-related injuries are now the leading cause of death among children and adolescents in the United States (Goldstick et al., 2022). According to a report by the Pew Research Center published in August 2021, the number of children and teenagers in the United States who died as a result of gun violence increased by 50% between 2019 and 2021 (Gramlich, 2023). The report analyzed data from the CDC and found there were 1,739 firearm deaths among children and teens in 2020, compared to 1,154 in 2019 (CDC Wonder, 2023). This is the highest number of such deaths in at least two decades.

This ongoing crisis requires a multifaceted advocacy approach to address the complex social, economic, and political factors contributing to gun violence. As consistently trusted and highly

educated health care professionals, nurses have a critical role to play in promoting gun safety and injury prevention in the pursuit of critical, evidence-based policies that protect public health.

Nurses encounter the devastating consequences of gun violence firsthand in their clinical practice. Emergency departments, trauma centers, and critical care units are often the first points of contact for patients with gunshot wounds and their families. Nurses provide life-saving interventions, manage complex wounds, and support patients and families throughout the recovery process. Yet their work does not end at the bedside. Nurses have a unique perspective on the root causes of gun violence, including social determinants of health, mental health, and access to health care, education, and employment opportunities. By using their undeniably superior communication skills, and deep base of knowledge, nurses can readily seize the moment and rapidly emerge as leaders in preventing gun violence and promoting health equity.

### Patient Education and Counseling

A key role nurses can play in gun violence prevention is through patient education and counseling. Nurses can use their clinical encounters to discuss gun safety with patients and their families, including safe storage practices, risk factors for unintentional injuries, and signs of suicide risk. Several studies have shown that health care providers' counseling and interventions can effectively reduce the risk of firearm injuries and deaths (Rowhani-Rahbar et al., 2016; Webster et al., 2004). Nurses can also insert themselves, and thus, work collaboratively with community organizations, law enforcement, and other stakeholders to develop comprehensive gun safety programs tailored to the specific needs and concerns of their patient populations. Such programs may include education on the safe storage of firearms, risks of domestic violence, and the importance of reporting suspicious behavior to law enforcement (Fowler et al., 2017).

### Public Health Development, Policy and Research

Another critical role nurses can play in gun violence prevention is through policy

development. Nurses can leverage their collective voices and expertise to promote evidence-based policies aimed at reducing gun violence. For example, nurses can lobby legislatively for universal background checks, which have been effective in reducing firearm homicides and suicides (Santaella-Tenorio et al., 2016). Nurses can also support policies aimed at reducing access to firearms for individuals at high risk of harming themselves or others, such as domestic abusers and individuals with mental illness (Swanson et al., 2017).

### Promoting Health Equity and Addressing Social Determinants

As frontline health care providers, nurses can identify and address underlying factors that contribute to gun violence, including poverty, racism, discrimination, and lack of access to health care and education. Nurses can play a critical role in promoting health equity and addressing social determinants of gun violence. Nurses can work collaboratively with community organizations and policymakers to develop comprehensive strategies aimed at addressing these factors and promoting health equity. Such strategies may include improving access to health care and social services, promoting economic and educational opportunities, and addressing systemic racism and discrimination (CDC, 2021).

### Nurses' Roles and Responsibilities

Gun violence prevention is at the core of all nurses' roles and responsibilities. School nurses are often the first health care professionals students interact with during their school day. They have a unique opportunity to identify and address potential risks related to firearms. School nurses can educate students, families, and school staff on safe storage practices and the potential dangers of firearms in the home. Additionally, they can advocate for evidence-based policies that promote gun violence prevention, such as safe storage laws and youth-focused firearm laws (Webster et al., 2004).

According to a systematic review by Rowhani-Rahbar and colleagues (2016), physician counseling and training on firearm safety can have

a positive impact on patient behavior related to safe storage and gun violence prevention. Similarly, nursing interventions that promote firearm safety and gun violence prevention can have a significant impact on patient outcomes. Nurses are trained in emergency trauma care and clinical responses necessary for addressing traumatic gun violence, as well as promoting safe storage through community-based education (Choma, 2023). As health care partners embedded in school communities, school nurses have a steadfast focus on the prevention of injury and death from gun violence. They can guide all efforts that champion the cause, sounding the alarm and creating evidence-based, multidisciplinary solutions to advance the safety and security of all our nation's children (Cogan et al., 2019).

Nursing leaders, including those in academic settings, can also play a critical role in addressing gun violence. They can provide education and training to nursing students and practicing nurses on how to identify and respond to patients at risk of firearm-related injuries. This may include screening patients for firearm access, providing patient education on safe storage and firearm safety, and facilitating access to mental health resources for patients at risk for suicide or violence (Swanson et al., 2017). Nursing leaders can advocate for policy changes at the organizational and governmental levels to address the issue of gun violence. They can work with policymakers to develop and implement evidence-based policies, such as universal background checks and red flag laws, which aim to reduce the risk of firearm-related injuries and deaths (Santaella-Tenorio et al., 2016).

Nurses play a vital role in addressing gun violence prevention by utilizing their unique perspective and expertise in health care. Through education, advocacy, and implementation of evidence-based interventions, nurses can make a significant impact in reducing gun-related injuries and deaths. By working collaboratively with patients, families, communities, policymakers, and other health care providers, nurses can promote a culture of safety and wellness that values the sanctity of human life. Ultimately, it is essential to recognize gun violence is a public health crisis that requires a multifaceted approach, and nurses can be instrumental in achieving meaningful change. \$

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