Youth Gun Violence: Addressing the Root Causes

Mason K. Fairley

Executive Summary

Gun related deaths in the United States have been on the rise since the 1980’s, especially in recent years. Mass shootings and shooting deaths in communities across the nation have become one of the biggest problems in the country. Mass shootings have occurred almost every year for the past decade, in schools, grocery stores, and even churches. Young people are often the victims of gun violence and they are affected whether they are victims, survivors, or witnesses to this type of violence. Firearms are the leading cause of death for American youth, a problem that needs to be addressed. Congress can take steps to reduce youth gun violence and the number of youth firearm related deaths or injuries. Congress should pass an assault weapons ban, require universal background checks, and provide resources to help address bullying among students and help them receive proper mental health support.

Problem Statement

American youth face a high risk of exposure to a gun related injury or death. It is critical that Congress address this issue so that the number of young people affected by gun violence is reduced to zero. The majority of youth related gun injuries or death happen in the home. This happens because children know the password to the gun safe and they have access to a firearm. Parents often leave firearms laying around where children can reach them and when the parent leaves the child accidentally plays with the gun and mistakenly hurts themselves or others. The United States accounts for almost 46 percent of the world’s firearms amounting to 393 million firearms (Karp). The sheer number of firearms in the United States, coupled with easy accessibility to guns demonstrates a need for action. 1.7 million youth live in a house with an unlocked gun
safe or a loaded gun (Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia Research Center). A study showed that in 2015 about 2,824 youth from the ages of 0 to 19 died due to a gun related injury, and 13,723 children were injured by a gun (Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia Research Center). This information alone shows that youth are at high risk of being in a home that has an unlocked and loaded gun.

There is a significant issue with firearms in American homes given that most of these deaths occur when children are playing with a loaded gun when their parent or guardian is not home. States who have implemented universal background checks and mandatory waiting periods prior to the purchase of a firearm have lower rates of suicide than states who do not. In states with increased gun availability, death rates from gunshots for youth were higher than in states with less availability. Most accidental firearm deaths among young people are related to child access to firearms and are either self-inflicted or at the hands of another child. Studies have shown that states with CAP laws have a lower rate of unintentional death than states without CAP laws. CAP Laws are Child Access Prevention Laws that help prevent minors from gaining access to a firearm when parents or guardians are away from the home. CAP laws encourage the safe storage of firearms by imposing liability on adults who allow children to have unsupervised access to guns (Giffords Law Center).

Assault weapons account for a portion of youth gun related deaths in the United States but they have been the weapon of choice for mass shootings and to cause chaos in large crowds. Since 1982, there have been 99 mass shootings (Giffords Law Center). On April 16, 2007, a student at Virginia Tech used a firearm to murder 32 of his classmates. On December 14, 2012 a man murdered 20 students and 6 school staff at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in Newtown, Connecticut, killing mostly children below the age of 10 years old. On October 1, 2015 a student at Umpqua Community College, in Roseburg, Oregon, used a firearm to murder 9 victims. On February 14, 2018, a gunman opened fire with an assault weapon in Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The shooting resulted in the death of 17 people and injured 17 others. On May 18, 2018, a teen shooter took a shotgun and his father’s revolver and used them to kill 10 people at Santa Fe High School in Texas. These are just a few examples of many mass shootings in the United States. In 2017, 11 mass shootings
caused 117 fatalities and 587 injuries that occurred at religious centers, schools, concerts, workplaces, airports, and shopping areas (Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia Research Center).

Firearms were the murder weapon in 86 percent of youth homicides in 2014 (“Youth Violence Facts at a Glance”). During 2014, homicides with a firearm accounted for 3,702 homicides committed against youth ages 10 to 24 (“Youth Violence Facts at a Glance”). Of the 3,702 firearm homicides committed against youth, 68 percent were carried out against African Americans, 19 percent against Hispanics, 12 percent against whites, and 1 percent against American Indians/Alaskan Natives or Asians/Pacific Islanders (“Gun Violence and Youth”). Youth firearm homicide victims are more likely to be male, with 89 percent of homicides against youths ages 10 to 24 in 2014 committed against males (“Gun Violence and Youth”). Youth between the ages of 15 to 24 experienced a higher rate of homicides with a firearm than any other age group, at about 8.2 per 100,000 people. During 2009-2010, 70 percent of all firearm homicides of 10 to 19-year-olds were committed in the most populous metropolitan statistical areas in the country (“Gun Violence and Youth”).

In order to stop youth gun related deaths in the United States or to drastically reduce them there must be federal regulations that are put in place so that there are universal background checks occurring whenever anyone tries to buy a firearm. A federal background check requirement was adopted in 1994 and a result millions of people who should not have access to firearms do not. Federal regulations would also help limit the spread of guns being trafficked in the United States and keep them out of the hands of our nation’s youth. However, there are many loopholes in our current background check system that allow people who should not have access to firearms to gain access. For instance, Americans buy guns from unlicensed sellers or online without needing to have a background check. There are states that have passed their own laws to close the private sale loophole, which means that a background check needs to be done whenever there is a transfer of a firearm to another person. A universal background check would mean that all private purchases of firearms would also involve a background check like it would for a licensed dealer.
Universal background checks, and banning assault weapons would help reduce the number of youth killed or injured due to a firearm. In 1994, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Youth Handgun Safety Act, which restricted the possession of a handgun or ammunition by a young person (defined as 18 years old or younger) or the private transfer of a handgun to a young person. There were a number of exceptions to this law that allowed some young people access to handguns for their jobs or hunting. This is important because young people should not possess firearms. However, because of parents or guardians with unlocked guns, trafficking of guns and private sales of guns, many more young people have access to firearms than they should.

In 1994, President Bill Clinton also signed into law an Assault Weapons Ban (the Public Safety and Recreational Firearms Use Protection Act) that reduced the number of deaths due to assault weapons in the United States. However, in 2004 that ban ended and has not been passed again by Congress. After the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, President Barack Obama pressed Congress to work on an assault weapons ban, but the Senate voted against S. 150, The Assault Weapons Ban and it has not been brought to the Senate floor again. Many members of Congress have not spoken up about the issue because of the substantial support they receive from the National Rifle Association (NRA). Half of incumbents in Congress have received campaign support from the NRA, this campaign funding could correlate to lack of action on youth gun safety issues.

Throughout this time, students have largely led efforts to combat youth gun violence. Even in the most recent school shootings like the Parkland School shooting, students from across the nation protested and urged Congress to act on gun control so that students could go to school without the threat of a shooting. While young people continue to be victims and survivors of gun violence, they are also using their voices to advocate for change, so that they can attend church, school, or walk in their neighborhood without fearing that they would be murdered by a firearm. There are a number of ways that the federal government could help prevent youth gun violence by addressing its root causes and providing safe alternatives for young people to feel safe and heard.
Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1
Congress should pass legislation that prevents people from being able to buy assault weapons in the United States. This should be modeled after the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban. This law would define assault weapons as semi-automatic firearms. Unlike the 1994 version, this would ban all assault weapons, not just specific makes and models and would create a ban on the creation of any semi-automatic weapons in the future. This ban would help keep assault weapons out of the hands of minors and would possibly limit the number of youth gun related injuries or deaths in the United States.

Recommendation 2
Congress should make it mandatory for schools to create programs that provide anti-bullying resources and train students and teachers on how to prevent bullying, youth violence and support trauma-informed practices. If students are being bullied then there should be counselors at every school who can help the student deal with mental needs and support young people who are dealing with trauma due to their home live, school, gun violence, or other issues. Congress should consider passing H.R. 2958, Increasing Access to Mental Health in Schools Act, which would increase the number of school-based mental health service providers in low income school districts.

Recommendation 3
Congress should pass legislation requiring all Americans who own a firearm to keep it locked up and encourage gun-owners to go through gun safety programs to learn more about the impact of unlocked guns. This would prevent young people from accessing the guns, so that gun-owners learn more about why they should be extremely careful about allowing their children to access or know where guns are located. If the child somehow finds out the location and code to the gun safe and they leave the child at home alone, they should move the gun or have a responsible person watch the child so that an accidental death or injury does not happen.
Recommendation 4

Congress should pass universal background checks in all states so that gun dealers know who they are selling firearms to. This would mean that all purchases of firearms in the United States would go through the National Instant Criminal Background Check System and would include private sales. There would no longer be loopholes where certain people could purchase guns depending on where they buy them from. This would verify that people who should not have access to gun do not.