Reducing Youth Gun Violence through Increasing Youth Development Opportunities in the United States

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Executive Summary

This policy memo deals with gun violence, but focuses on gun access and the impact of federal legislation in combating gun violence and its impact on young people. Preventing gun violence by limiting gun access is a huge step for decreasing homicide and suicide rates in the United States. Many federal programs that support community-based approaches to reducing youth violence focus on large cities, but smaller communities need additional support and resources in order to combat youth gun violence, as well. Preventing youth gun violence will take many different approaches and programs being put in place so young people are safe. In order to accomplish this Congress should focus on the smallest communities and engage youth interests and ideas. Young people vulnerable to gun violence would be able to have access to new activities which could encourage other young people to join and eventually develop entire communities and those young people would have bright ideas for their future. Congress must help keep young people out of trouble and ensure they get the proper experience that a young person deserves to have. Young people in communities that suffer from gun violence often suffer from trauma that Congress should also address in legislation meant to combat this issue.

Problem Statement

Gun violence is a critical issue because of lives lost due to violence, school shootings and wrongful gun access. There are many ways that Americans deal with gun violence such as glorified gun culture, discussing the second amendment, and state gun policies. Congress has refused to address gun deaths and mass shootings. Addressing
gun access would potentially save thousands of lives. It appears that nothing—no matter how horrific the event is—will lead to tighter restrictions on guns. Even after accounting for population differences, the gun homicide rate in the United States is around 73 times higher than Britain and many other nations (Grishteyn). America is the only industrial nation in which the possession of rifles, shotguns, and handguns is lawfully prevalent among large numbers of its population.

There has been an ongoing public battle over gun ownership rights, but until recent years the Supreme Court had decided very little on the issue. In the 2016 election, the National Rifle Association (NRA) spent $11,438,118 to support Donald Trump’s campaign and donated $19,756,346 to groups opposing Hillary Clinton’s (Lord). However, the bulk of the contributions from the NRA have gone to members of Congress. While there have been a few attempts to move legislation related to reducing gun violence in the United States Congress, especially after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, the influence of the NRA has played a role in preventing meaningful action. The issue of gun violence as it affects young people provides an opportunity for Congress to act specifically on this issue, rather than the whole topic of firearms in the United States.

Gun ownership in the United States is rooted in the Second Amendment. The Constitution says, “a well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” However, the right is not unlimited. The Supreme Court has upheld some firearms restrictions, such as bans on concealed weapons and on the possession of certain types of weapons, as well as prohibitions against the sale of guns to gangs and illegal trading. The Gun Control Act of 1968 is a federal law that regulates the firearms industry and firearms owners. It primarily focuses on regulating interstate commerce in firearms by generally prohibiting interstate firearms transfers except among licensed manufacturers, dealers and importers. This law prohibits individuals under eighteen years of age, convicted criminals, the discharged military and others from purchasing firearms. The Gun Control Act of 1968, defined private sellers as anyone who sold no more than four firearms per year, but in 1986 Firearm Owners Protection Act lifted that restriction and
loosely defined private sellers as people who do not rely on gun sales. It also revises the current prohibition against the sale of firearms or ammunition to individuals.

Law enforcement often discharge their guns on people who are not really a threat. Black boys and young men are more likely to be murdered by police. Gun-related violence threatens our most fundamental human right, the right to live. In fact, in 2019, use of force by law enforcement was a leading cause of death for black men (Williams). In these cases, gun violence not only impacts communities of color, but other communities who witness the deaths caused by a gun. When people are afraid of gun violence, this can also have a negative impact on people’s right to education or health care when they are too afraid to attend schools or health facilities or if these services are not fully functioning due to firearm violence in their community. This gives insight on the basic psychological effects on how fearful gun violence can be. People who survive or witness gun violence deal with trauma and other negative mental health effects.

Young people who witness or survive gun violence have to deal with many emotions and issues. There is a lot of emotional trauma that happens for young people that affect their whole lives. There are many different kinds of psychological and physical symptoms that occur as a result of this kind of trauma. For instance, young people who are dealing with the aftermath of trauma experience symptoms like stomachaches, headaches, anxiety, shock, nightmares, mood swings, depression, and severe changes in personality (Everytown for Gun Safety). This trauma also leads to chronic illnesses like heart disease and obesity among other potential diseases. Trauma can be debilitating to the extent that “fear leads many survivors of gun violence to avoid situations where they might be reminded of the violence” (Reardon). Additionally, gun violence not only affects the young person, but affects everyone around them. This is especially important for young people who are constantly having a connection to gun violence, for instance, young people who witness or hear about gun violence in their communities every day. They are retraumatized and can face even more issues because of multiple exposures.

In 2020, a federal appeals court struck down one of the toughest gun control laws in the country. Gun control can resolve and create conflict not only between the
regular citizen, but also within the government. Between buying or selling firearms the issue will still occur with many questions remaining. One of the biggest questions that remains is why do young people have so much access to guns when they should not? This question should be asked every day and discussed openly with communities and elected officials. From mass shootings to homicides, the easy access to guns has made gun violence a main issue in the country for Americans. Although the United States believes in the right to bear arms, the people need reformation and reduction in gun violence because it impacts young people. The United States needs to assess gun violence and increase gun control while also thinking of the rights of the people as well as the laws that are already put forward and set to come to a fair conclusion between both sides. This would create a society where young people do not feel unsafe wherever they are and allow Americans who are responsible gun owners to continue to own their guns.

**Policy Recommendations**

Youth who experience gun violence throughout their childhood forces them to deal with trauma at an early age. They become accustomed to the gun shot sounds being heard outside of their homes. Congress should work to include trauma and awareness for youth who are survivors or who have witnessed gun violence. Congress can ensure this goal is met by implementing the following recommendations:

**Recommendation 1**

**Congress should pass legislation that creates a federal grant program that invests in young people who live in small communities with high-rates of gun violence that keeps them active and supported with positive youth development activities.** Interests that the youth have could lead them to career exploration, gaining new hobbies, holding leadership positions and being active in civics. Youth development programs could provide services like therapeutic mentoring, food pantries, skill training for future careers, college prep classes, and academic tutoring. The youth could recruit other youth into the programs which eventually would start a chain of strong and supportive relationships for them. The Department of Justice and
Department of Health and Human Services would administer and run this grant together with consultation from the Department of Education.

**Recommendation 2**
**Congress should pass legislation that provides funding for mental health services for communities experiencing high-rates of gun violence.** The Department of Health and Human Services would administer and run this grant program. This program would specifically support young people receiving mental health services and support if they are survivors or have been impacted by gun violence in any way. Community based non-profit organizations or schools could receive this funding to support these young people. They could tell their stories and start to write their emotions about how they have dealt with their trauma. They could also recommend advice through peer mentoring to other youth who are facing these issues so that they do not feel isolated.

**Recommendation 3**
**Congress should pass H.R. 4167, The Securing American Families by Educating and Training You (SAFETY) Through Nonviolence Act.** This bill awards grants to organizations to prevent the effects of community violence through education, mentoring and counseling in principles related to nonviolence. These organizations can be non-profits, faith-based organizations or state or government agencies. Organizations who apply receive priority if they can demonstrate that they have increased violence in their community or they have a lack of resources to create an effective community-based violence prevention campaign.

**Recommendation 4**
**Congress should pass legislation that improves the background check process for gun owners.** Right now, not all firearms vendors participate in the background check process, but every vendor of firearms should conduct a background check on anyone who wishes to purchase a gun. Ultimately, this would prevent people who should have not access to guns from getting them. Third party sellers would no longer
be able to just sell guns, but they would also have to ensure that Americans purchasing guns are verified and do not have anything in their history that should prevent them from owning a gun.