



COMMITTEE ON ENERGY & COMMERCE

CHAIRMAN FRANK PALLONE, JR.

MEMORANDUM

September 27, 2019

To: Subcommittee on Health Members and Staff

Fr: Committee on Energy and Commerce Staff

Re: Hearing on “A Public Health Crisis: The Gun Violence Epidemic in America:

On Thursday, October 3, at 9:30 a.m. in the Great Hall of Kennedy King College in Chicago, Illinois, the Subcommittee on Health will hold a field hearing entitled, “A Public Health Crisis: The Gun Violence Epidemic in America.” Community members, health providers, and other public health and safety officials will discuss the public health impact of gun violence, the role of gun violence public health research, and prevention approaches.

I. BACKGROUND

Every day, 100 Americans are killed on average by a firearm. Hundreds more Americans are shot and injured daily.¹ In 2017, the most recent year for which complete data are available, 39,773 people died from gun-related injuries.² This was a significant increase from 2016,³ and the highest rate of gun deaths per capita in more than two decades.⁴ Of these gun deaths, 60 percent were suicides, 37 percent were homicides, and the remaining three percent were unintentional, involved law enforcement, or had undetermined circumstances.⁵

In 2016, firearm suicides accounted for half of all suicide deaths in the United States.⁶ Studies show that access to a firearm increases one’s risk for contemplating suicide, especially

¹ Everytown for Gun Safety, *Gun Violence in America*, www.everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-america/ (2019).

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Nat’l Vital Statistics Reports Vol. 68, No. 9, at 12 (June 24, 2019).

³ *Id.*

⁴ John Gramlich, *What the Data Says about Gun Deaths in the U.S.*, Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/16/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/> (Aug. 16, 2019).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ American Public Health Association, *Reducing Suicides by Firearms*, www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2019/01/28/reducing-suicides-by-firearms (Nov. 13, 2018).

during a time of increased risk of suicide (e.g., divorce or job loss).⁷ One study found that in states where guns were more prevalent, rates of suicides were higher, and in states where gun ownership was lower, suicide rates were lower.⁸ Although there are links between gun violence, suicide, and mental health conditions related to suicide, most mentally ill individuals are not violent.⁹ Those with mental illness are more likely to be the victims of violence, rather than commit violence.¹⁰

The homicide rate in the United States is more than 25 times the averages of other developed nations.¹¹ While most of these gun homicides are not the result of mass shootings, the United States has more mass shootings than any country in the world.¹² According to an analysis by the Washington Post, four or more people have been killed in a mass shooting every 47 days, on average, since June 2015, and the death tolls from these shootings have been increasing.¹³ In addition to the increasing death toll, mass shootings have evoked stress, anxiety, and fears in children and parents, who in many instances have been taught new protocols for how to respond in the event of a mass shooting in schools or other public places.¹⁴

While unintentional shootings comprise a smaller number of firearm deaths, they make up 18 percent of overall gun injuries, frequently involving people under age 24, who are often shot by someone else around their own age.¹⁵

Approximately 1,500 children are shot and killed each year, raising it to the second-leading cause of death among children overall and the first-leading cause of death among black children.¹⁶ Black children and teens are 14 times more likely than white children and teens of

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, *Guns and Suicide: A Fatal Link*, www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/magazine/guns-and-suicide/.

⁹ Nat'l Alliance on Mental Illness, *Violence and Gun Reporting Laws*, www.nami.org/learn-more/mental-health-public-policy/violence-and-gun-reporting-laws.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Erin Grinshteyn and David Hemenway, *Violent Death Rates: The US Compared with Other High-income OECD Countries, 2010*, Am. J. Med. Mar. 2016, at 268 (2016).

¹² Jen Christensen, *Why the US has the Most Mass Shootings*, CNN www.cnn.com/2015/08/27/health/u-s-most-mass-shootings/index.html (Oct. 5, 2017).

¹³ Bonnie Berkowitz et al., *More and Deadlier: Mass Shooting Trends in America*, THE WASHINGTON POST, www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/08/05/more-deadlier-mass-shooting-trends-america/ (Aug. 5, 2019). There is no one definition of mass shooting. The analysis included in this piece defines a mass shooting as one in which at least four people were killed, not including the shooters, in public places or large private gatherings.

¹⁴ Alia Wong, *When 'Back to School' Means Back to Mass-Shooting Fears*, THE ATLANTIC, www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/08/shootings-el-paso-dayton-add-kids-anxiety/595723/ (Aug. 9, 2019).

¹⁵ Giffords Law Center, *Gun Violence Statistics*, lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/gun-violence-statistics (2019).

¹⁶ *Id.*

the same age to die by gun homicide.¹⁷ Racial disparities among gun violence victims exist for adults as well. Black men make up 52 percent of all gun homicide victims, despite only being seven percent of the U.S. population. Black Americans are 10 and 14 times more likely than white Americans to die by gun homicide and assault respectively.¹⁸

Those who are exposed to an environment of gun violence are subject to more harms extending beyond direct physical injury. For example, studies have shown that those children who are exposed to community violence, including witnessing shootings and hearing gunshots, find it harder to succeed in school and have lower test scores and concentration levels.¹⁹ Children exposed to violence, crime, and abuse are also more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol; suffer from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder; use violent and aggressive behavior; and engage in criminal activity.²⁰

Gun violence affects urban, suburban, and rural areas. Large metro areas have historically had higher homicide rates and lower suicide rates than the national average, but both homicide and suicide rates have been increasing in large cities in recent years.²¹

In Chicago, while the rate of suicides has remained constant, the rate of firearm homicides increased from six per 100,000 residents in 2013, to 8.1 per 100,000 residents in 2016—a significant increase.²² Just earlier this month, 43 people were shot, eight fatally, over the course of Labor Day weekend.²³

II. GUN VIOLENCE RESEARCH FUNDING

Although gun violence is increasing and is one of the leading causes of death in the United States, very little public research goes into studying the public health effects of gun violence, especially when compared to other leading causes of death. For example, though gun violence kills about as many individuals as sepsis, funding for gun violence research is about 0.7

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Everytown for Gun Safety, *The Impact of Gun Violence on Children and Teens*, <https://everytownresearch.org/impact-gun-violence-american-children-teens/> (2019).

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ Scott R. Kegler, Linda L. Dahlberg, and James A. Mercy, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Firearm Homicides and Suicides in Major Metropolitan Areas — United States, 2012-2013 and 2015-2016*, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Vol. 67, No. 44, at 1237 (Nov. 9, 2018).

²² *Id.* at 1234.

²³ *43 Shot — 8 Fatally — in Chicago Labor Day Weekend Shootings*, Chicago Sun-Times, Sept. 3, 2019, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/crime/2019/9/1/20841934/labor-day-weekend-shootings-gun-violence-homicide>.

percent of that for sepsis.²⁴ According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), funding instability has limited firearm research throughout the research community.²⁵

The near absence of Federal funding for gun violence research was attributed to appropriations language that prohibits any U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) funding from being used “to advocate or promote gun control,” often referred to as the “CDC ban” or the “Dickey Amendment.” This funding restriction was originally placed on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) funding and has since been expanded to all HHS spending after the CDC Injury Prevention Center funded research published in an article in the New England Journal of Medicine entitled *Gun Ownership as a Risk of Homicide in the Home*.²⁶

Although the appropriations language itself only prohibits advocacy and promotion of gun control, and not gun violence research, it has been widely stated that the Dickey Amendment placed a chilling effect on researching gun violence.²⁷ After calls from Members of Congress and advocacy organizations, the House Committee on Appropriations filed report language, along with the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018, which aimed to clarify that “the Secretary of Health and Human Services has stated the CDC has the authority to conduct research on the causes of gun violence.”²⁸ However, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018 did not include any funds for gun violence research, and there has been no investment in gun violence research made by CDC or other health agencies since the 2018 bill was signed into law.²⁹

This year, the House has, for the first time since the Dickey Amendment was first signed into law, included in its fiscal year (FY) 2020 Appropriations bill \$50 million in funding for gun violence research at CDC and NIH.³⁰ The bill passed the House on June 19, 2019, and it is currently pending in the Senate.

²⁴ David E. Stark and Nigam H. Shah, *Funding and Publication of Research on Gun Violence and Other Leading Causes of Death*, 317 J. Am. Med. Assn. 1, at 84 (2017).

²⁵ U.S. Gov’t Accountability Office, GAO-17-665, *Personal Firearms: Programs that Promote Safe Storage and Research on Their Effectiveness*, 20 (2017).

²⁶ Arthur L. Kellerman et al., *Gun Ownership as a Risk Factor for Homicide in the Home*, New England J. Med. Vol. 329, No. 10, at 1084 (Oct. 7, 1993).

²⁷ Nell Greenfeildboyce, *Spending Bill Lets CDC Study Gun Violence; But Researchers are Skeptical it will Help*, NPR, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/03/23/596413510/proposed-budget-allows-cdc-to-study-gun-violence-researchers-skeptical> (March 23, 2018).

²⁸ 164 Cong. Rec. H2700 (daily ed. Mar. 22, 2018).

²⁹ Pub. L. No. 115-141.

³⁰ H.R. Rep. No. 116-62 (2019).

III. WITNESSES

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