

# Human Lives Valued over Guns

“Are we listening to our children asking for help?”

Violence not only reared its ugly head abroad in the Russia-Ukraine war. Gun violence spread death across the nation, too. Between 2019 and 2021, gun deaths among children rose 50 percent.<sup>1</sup> According to Pew Research Center analysis of data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, since then, the United States has become the only developed nation in the world where gun violence outpaced motor vehicle accidents and was “ranked the top cause of death among children and teens.”<sup>2</sup> In May, 2022, a mass shooting killed 10 at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, followed by the massacre of 19 children, two teachers, and 17 more injured at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. These were unwelcome reminders of what some might now consider “a new normal.”<sup>3</sup> In his speech after visiting with families in Uvalde, Texas, President Biden cited a study that over the last two decades, more kids than soldiers have been killed by guns.<sup>4</sup> That statistic is haunting evidence that in the past twenty years, children and teens account for most of the nation’s dead. High school students have walked out of classes to protest a country that prioritizes guns over the lives of its young people who will likely inherit communities that have become “killing fields.” A nation of gun violence is indeed the public health crisis Surgeon General Vivek Murthy recently declared it to be.<sup>5</sup> Rallying in a show of support were many who have participated in March for Our Lives, Moms who Demand Action, coaches, and newspaper editorials. All implored the nation’s people to think: “Are we listening to our children asking for help?” Then, perhaps just to push away the palpable grief that hung in the air, the first legislation of its kind in 30 years passed. The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act was commendable as a first, or baby step.<sup>6</sup> The act includes mental health and school safety provisions, but the incremental gun legislation failed to address high-powered firearms and ammunition that history shows are the weapons of choice favored by mass shooters. Despite the entrenched controversy that surrounds gun violence, there may be four areas in which concerned citizens find common ground and possible compromise—particularly when seen through the lens of Murthy’s public health crisis.

1 First, we might consider that when laws, such as taking the lives of others, are broken this often, perhaps it is time to strengthen pre-cautions—those steps that can be taken to preempt some of the violence that can be *anticipated* in order to keep laws strong and respected. In 2021 violent crime had been on the rise, and police reported feeling they were the enemy. In 2021, more than 129 officers died in the line of duty. “Seventy-three of those officers were killed...almost entirely by firearms.”<sup>7</sup> In May, 2024, four law enforcement officers were fatally shot, while serving a warrant in Charlotte, North Carolina. At his memorial service, Kelly Weeks, the grieving wife of slain U.S. Deputy Marshal Thomas Weeks, Jr. said, “So what do I need? I need this country to come together to support our law enforcement officers so they can continue to fight for justice.”<sup>8</sup> At the Kansas City Chiefs Super Bowl celebration rally on Valentine’s Day in 2024, an argument escalated into a shooting that left one dead and at least 21 wounded. “More than 800 law enforcement officers were in the area for the event.”<sup>9</sup> Later, police said they didn’t know what more they could do to keep the public safe at large gatherings.<sup>10</sup> It is that “what more?” that is where society needs to step up and help police and other public servants do their best to keep all of us safe. In January, 2021, twenty-four million AR’s were already in circulation in the U.S. That was a 75% increase in firearms from 2020. “The sheer number of increase of guns in circulation means at least some of those guns will add to the already huge number of deaths involving firearms. Geoff Bennett, co-anchor for PBS *NewsHour*, writes, “We have stopped more than four million, through the Brady Law, four million sales of guns to *prohibited* purchasers.”<sup>12</sup> But note the emphasis: the Brady Law did not stop millions of sales of guns. Rather, it stopped only an additional four million sales to purchasers who were *already prohibited* from owning guns! Mass shootings have tripled since Congress failed to renew a ban on high-capacity magazines and semi-automatic weapons like AR-15s in 1994.

Co-founder of the Violence Project James Densley told *USA Today*, “Semi-automatic weapons are cheaper, more available and more aggressively marketed since the one-year Federal Assault Weapons Ban expired in 2004.”<sup>13</sup> If we stop to realize how many of these lives could have been saved, how much human suffering might have been prevented, then that statistical evidence alone is reason enough for Congress to reinstate the previous ban on those weapons that might have prevented some of the mass shootings that have since tripled. Without military-style weapons, mass murders would be less frequent because lone shooters could not extinguish the lives of so many, so quickly. To pretend this is not so is like saying Putin demolished Ukrainian cities by himself—without weapons of war and ammunition. Or that George Floyd died without someone’s knee on his neck. Yelling “fire!” in a crowded theatre is not protected speech because when acts of violence are carried out—versus those contemplated—agent and tool fuse. Jonathan Capehart, journalist at the *Washington Post*, is realistic, albeit disheartened: “We’re not going to stop mass shootings. But what we can do is lessen their frequency...the ability of these people seeking recognition...to get their hands on guns.”<sup>14</sup> As if to prove Capehart “right,” just days into January, 2023, 40 mass shootings signaled a kind of “New” Year with the most killings ever in January.<sup>15</sup> Geoff Bennett, co-anchor of the PBS *NewsHour*, offered a sobering thought: “When gun violence is the number one killer of our children, surpassing automobile fatalities,” we can no longer say we are a nation of law and order.<sup>16</sup> More states are responding. A year before gun violence was declared a public health crisis, Governor Jay Inslee’s ban made “Washington the tenth state, in addition to Washington D. C., to enact broad restrictions on assault-style weapons.”<sup>17</sup> Inslee signed a bill that stated: “The legislature finds... gun violence is a threat to the public health and safety of Washingtonians. Assault weapons are civilian versions of weapons created for the military ...designed to kill humans quickly and efficiently...inaction against gun violence is unacceptable.”<sup>18</sup> 2. A second area of possible compromise is that a right to constitutional liberty is a reciprocal right—live and let live.

There is an individual and social dimension because in a “free society,” an individual’s freedom is intricately interconnected with everyone else’s freedom—embedded in the single-garment from which a society is woven. Many see the right to own guns important to their freedom to live. But those same voices may need to address legitimate concerns from the other side of their freedom—how best to let live those others who have an equal right to life. Congress needs to rethink how to uphold the rights to life and the freedom of association in society for the *majority* of its citizens as well as for individual citizens. The First Amendment does not protect someone from yelling “Fire!” in crowded spaces. Nor does the Second Amendment protect gun owners’ from literally firing powerful weapons in spaces people commonly gather—in schools, places of worship, hospitals, concerts, night clubs, military bases, sports marathons, grocery stores, airports, parades — throughout our communities. But Congress is not adequately protecting the common rights to life of citizens as they seek to “associate freely.” Freedom is more complicated and nuanced than carrying around a gun or other weapon. If we do not care about the human relationships that weave us into communities, we become alienated, cut off from human bonds. Freedom becomes “another word for nothing left to lose.”<sup>19</sup> Kris Brown, President of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, asks, “Do we want a version of the Second Amendment that is a death sentence to our fellow Americans?”<sup>20</sup> As the birth of the nation’s “freedom” was celebrated on July 4, 2022, a mass shooter injured at least fifty people in a Chicago suburb and permanently ended the freedom of seven who died while attending a small-town Independence Day parade. <sup>21</sup> The 21-year-old shooter had legally bought five lethal weapons, including two high-powered rifles, with enough ammunition to fire 70 rounds.<sup>22</sup> Analysts told the media that despite there being “red flags,” the shooter posed “no clear and present danger.”<sup>23</sup> 3. A third area of compromise to help all in society would be if more “responsible gun owners” stepped up to work with mental health advocates to help draw distinctions between prudent oversight and reckless disregard for the possible mental health troubles or the immaturity of young people who have the same easy access to guns as do more mature and responsible adults. Brooks profiles the mostly young men who engage in mass shootings today: loners, extremely isolated at schools, experiences of being bullied, depressed, often suicidal, sometimes accompanied by hatred of the outside world, and possibly to compensate for lack of recognition—a fascination with guns.<sup>24</sup> This does not mean a young person should never have access to guns.

It means we have a right to demand Congress put into place more effective pre-cautions to protect the rights of all citizens—not merely the rights of the few, and before more mass murders occur. Reasonable exceptions can be made when adult gun owners oversee and guide a young person, perhaps especially those in more rural areas. For example, a young dental hygienist told me it does not feel safe at night when coyotes outside are howling, and I agreed. Her parents keep a gun locked up. We need to hear more from such responsible gun owners. They need to come forward and help society determine what mental health factors come into play in more densely populated areas of the nation, and when easy access to guns is made even easier. Melody McFadden, a Moms Demand Action volunteer whose family suffered gun violence, says she grew up talking about responsible gun ownership and how to react in emergencies. “The point was to be educated around guns.”<sup>25</sup> Whitney Austin and her husband secure their guns in a safe place and keep them separate from ammunition. Her research found “gun locks help prevent adolescent suicide.”<sup>26</sup> This precaution makes sense, particularly given that only half a year later, we learn that 70% of suicides and homicides, ages 10-17, involved a firearm.<sup>27</sup> Austin, a gun owner and Second Amendment supporter, was shot twelve times in her workplace at a Cincinnati bank in 2018. Today she says, “We need more compromise and working in the middle” to bypass extremes that “own the dialogue on guns.”<sup>28</sup> In 2021, gun sales went up 75%. In comparison with gun deaths in 2022, the pandemic seemed almost docile. Mental health is a primary reason gun lobbies and members of Congress use to excuse mass murderers. Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY) dismissed the Fourth of July massacres in 2022 by saying the cause of violence is mental health.<sup>29</sup> To demonstrate concern as one of our Congressional lawmakers, he did ... .. nothing. From 2009 to 2022, Everytown for Gun Safety found 1 in 3 mass shootings involved a shooter who was legally prohibited from having a gun—which is clear evidence of inadequate background checks.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps mental health guidelines and gun regulation are both needed to test a young person’s mental readiness and responsibility to have access to guns? Doing so might address a concern on the president’s Unity Agenda on Mental Health: Why does the misuse of freedom that occurs by those with troubled mental health so often pass under the radar?

So many warning signs—red flags—are noticed only in hindsight. At Club Q, a LGBTQ nightclub in Colorado Springs, a shooter killed five and injured others before a customer subdued him and police arrived. “The suspect allegedly threatened his mother with a homemade bomb” the year before, “yet no public red flag was tripped by Colorado’s Red Flag Law.”<sup>31</sup> In a federal investigation into a hate crime that killed three in Jacksonville, Florida, a 21-year-old suspect was reported involuntarily committed for a mental health exam in 2017, yet in recent months had legally purchased two AR-15 style weapons.<sup>32</sup> At Covenant Presbyterian private school in Nashville, Tennessee, a shooter bought seven guns legally while “being treated for an ‘emotional disorder’ about which law enforcement knew nothing.”<sup>33</sup> It is the responsibility of Congress to pass laws that provide the best possible pre-cautions to regulate guns getting into the hands of those who are not mentally or emotionally *mature enough* to handle them in order to reduce gun violence for the majority in society who would like to freely associate without being murdered. The *Washington Post* collated 338 shooting incidents and found “teenagers (age 13 to 19) were recorded to have carried out the highest number of shootings—183 of the 253 age-recorded incidents, excluding 86 cases where the shooter’s age is unknown.”<sup>34</sup> Early in 2023, families of Uvalde victims among others called for strengthening gun regulations, such as raising the age to buy firearms from 18 to 21. But why not 25? Consider that the judgment area of a young person’s brain is still developing until age 25.<sup>35</sup> Where is the good judgment of members of Congress—most of whom are considerably older—to allow powerful guns in the hands of those whose mental judgment has not yet even fully matured? We take driving tests to demonstrate 1)we are informed on the rules of the road and 2)we are mature enough to drive on roads with others instead of crashing into them. So too, mental health tests are needed before access to guns to demonstrate 1)one is educated about the danger of guns and the laws related to them, and 2)one has matured enough to respect the rights of others—even when one is angry, depressed and angry, or depressed, withdrawn, and angry.

After a 28-year-old “shot and killed three children and three adults at the Covenant Presbyterian School in Nashville, Tennessee,” Michigan’s governor spoke of a “uniquely American problem.”<sup>36</sup> “80-90% of all school shootings in the world happen in the United States. From 2020-2022, there were over 950.”<sup>37</sup> How is it that we continue to ignore this uniquely American problem? Bennett points to a failure in democracy: “What we’re hearing here is manifestly against what every poll tells us the American people want. A clear majority of citizens want universal background checks (92-93%) and restricted access to military-style weapons (77%) and ammunition (55%).”<sup>38</sup> When the laws of the nation do not reflect the will of the majority of citizens, democracy is undermined. And upon hearing that gun lobbyists attribute all these deaths to mental illness, Jerry Nadler (D-NY-12) pushed back by asking, “Are we 75% more mentally ill than all those in other countries?”<sup>39</sup> Congress has failed to strengthen precautions before allowing guns to get into hands of people who may not yet be ready to handle guns responsibly enough—due either to mental illness, mental immaturity, or blatant indifference to the deaths of others. Lawmakers should be able to agree that guns in less populated areas may be okay or even needed, but in more densely populated areas, different rules may be needed—just as there are different rules for carrying firearms into government offices. Safety of the majority may need to override an unfettered “freedom” of individual gun carriers. And where guns can be carried, mental health checks to handle carrying a gun should be passed by all people the same way drivers must pass a driver’s exam in order to determine that person’s mental maturity. Here is where two groups of lawmakers with different views might reasonably review the evidence in rural areas and in densely populated areas and then compromise at what age and in what different circumstances, different limits on access to guns should take precedence for the safety of all in society. 4. Ashley Beasley, a survivor of the July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022 shooting in Highland Park, Illinois asks, “How is this still happening? How can we *still* be failing our children?”<sup>40</sup> One answer to that question is: Nothing in Congress has changed. Some of this can be attributed to the internet—when a fringe element gains disproportionate influence over politicians who sell their souls for any and all votes. Much is also attributed to lawmakers grown lazy, who take being reelected to Congress or state office for granted, thus doing very little to account to the public for so many unresolved problems within our society.

From 2018-2021, shooting deaths tripled, and that increase takes its toll on medical personnel as well. In the wake of a Kentucky bank shooting, Dr. Jason Smith delivered an emotional message urging lawmakers to act against gun violence. “We can’t,” Smith said, “just keep doing what we’re doing.”<sup>41</sup> Might we need to reexamine priorities? Current legislators have put their chance to address the matter, and what they have done is simply inadequate. It is now time to vote them out of office and put in younger people who apparently can successfully lobby for change. Activist David Hogg, survivor of the 2018 shooting in Parkland, Florida, said that after the shooting, “activists successfully lobbied to raise the eligibility for firearm purchase to age 21 in Florida.”<sup>42</sup> In North Carolina, from 2019-2021, firearm deaths, after more than doubling, were the #1 cause of deaths.<sup>43</sup> The American Foundation of Suicide Prevention (AFSP) finds suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among college students.<sup>44</sup> In an article titled “‘Pre-pandemic, more than 4,000 NC State students reported suicidal thoughts; University reeling from five suicides this school year,’” Ph.D. sociology student Benjamin Pulgar-Guzman voiced some creative thinking when he addressed the Raleigh City Council about the suicides on campus: When we confront the administration, we are told the same old story...They say, ‘There’s a counselor shortage.’ We say, ‘Then reimagine the Counseling Center and its functions so you’re not just a crisis center but a mental wellness and a conflict management center.’<sup>45</sup> Monica Osburn, executive director of the Counseling Center and Prevention Services, said changes have now been made: NC State “added eight counselor positions”...and telehealth services so “a student who wants to access services...will be seen that day.”<sup>46</sup> US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, calls it “unacceptable” that “on average it takes eleven years from when... a young person has symptoms to when they can actually get treatment.”<sup>47</sup> An 11-year wait is not so much “unacceptable,” as it is non-existent! Neither teens nor others are likely to wait ... .. 11 years to express their fear and estrangement from society. In the meantime, there are guns ... and for “somebody who feels impotent,” David Brooks remarks, guns are “a siren song saying, you can be important, you can be powerful by killing.”<sup>48</sup>

We need to hold responsible state officials for what has been done with the massive amount of pandemic money they received from the federal government’s American Rescue Plan (ARP) and with the billion dollar surpluses in state budgets, such as North Carolina’s, in order to shorten an unacceptably long eleven years for someone to receive mental health treatment. In the aftermath of another campus shooting on August 30, 2023, at UNC-Chapel Hill, <sup>49</sup> Emmy Martin, editor-in-chief of *The Daily Tar Heel*, the school’s newspaper, put together the August 30, 2023 front page using only texts and social media messages that students had been sending each other while on lockdown. The graphic has been praised for its visceral impact by NPR, Judy Woodruff of PBS, and others because one cannot read it without feeling some of the pain, terror, and trauma our young people hold inside themselves.<sup>50</sup> As Martin stated, “Those text messages are messages that anybody who has lived through an active shooter situation, that they have received...[it’s] a cover that way too many people across the nation can connect with.”<sup>51</sup> Two weeks later, another armed shooting and school lockdown occurred on a UNC campus. As they stood “arm-in-arm” on the balcony of the North Carolina General Assembly’s public gallery, “student protesters chanted ‘Vote them out!’ at state Republican lawmakers.”<sup>52</sup> Their protest followed a rally in front of the State Legislative Building and did not stop until security escorted them outside. Student groups, some elected officials, and activists all demanded lawmakers pass stricter gun legislation.<sup>53</sup> “Why does this keep happening? We have had shooting after shooting...for decades,” asks Luke Diasio, an activist with UNC’s chapter of March for Our Lives. “We have been so blinded by gun rights that we have neglected our own human rights.”<sup>54</sup> Yet amid these school shootings at North Carolina colleges, House Speaker Tim Moore reiterated that “more gun control is not what he...see(s) as the solution to gun violence.”<sup>55</sup> After two gun-related lockdowns at UNC-Chapel Hill, Moore told students and advocates who came to the state legislature that their requests were likely to go nowhere —and that if the legislature does react, it would more likely be to further loosen gun rules.<sup>56</sup> *The Daily Tar Heel* news cover for August 30, 2023, should be shown *repeatedly* by all forms of the press during next year’s election cycle, along with each candidate’s past voting record on gun legislation and on publicly debating gun legislation. Twenty-six year old Brandon Tsay is one who “lunged at [and] disarmed a mass shooter.”<sup>57</sup> His bravery has led him to open up about his mental health.

Tsay says trauma from the incident causes him fears and anxiety that he is trying to work through in therapy.<sup>58</sup> Many in Congress are retiring, and pressure to reform gun laws in accord with what a majority of citizens wants needs to continue as we choose candidates in upcoming elections. We need to decide if we will vote into office to represent the future and safety of young people. The answers to how each candidate seeking office has addressed Murthy’s identification of gun violence as a national health crisis and what precautions they have taken to address mental health needs before young people have access to guns should be publicized—clearly based on the evidence of each politician’s track record. Those in Congress who are doing nothing are simply failing the democratic process. The mass shooting at the Denver Nuggets’ NBA finals celebration was the 291<sup>st</sup> mass shooting in 2023.<sup>59</sup>They have had their turn, and perhaps need to be replaced? Hopefully, independent voters can find a middle ground of candidates not in favor of this or that extreme and not against “bad guys on the other side” or “good guys” on this side, but rather candidates who have listened to the concerns on both sides and now want to work with others to help address a national health crisis. Because most mass murders have been committed by males and many male legislators have been unable or unwilling to act on the issue, we need to hear from more women who are speaking out. But for both men and women speaking out, for public figures speaking out, for college and high school students who have walked out of classes, for high school students and communities members who March for Our Lives, for parents and educators, for medical personnel and undertakers, for the over 220 CEOs who urged passage of the recent bipartisan gun legislation, for the growing number of unaffiliated voters, and for all people of conscience, it is no longer acceptable for Congress to perform with so little regard for protecting Americans’ right to freely associate with others—without fear of or actually being shot to death. Fortunately, the largest voting group is now independent voters. We must do our best to vote out of office all hardline gun advocates who vote against anticipating logical precautions that might be taken to avoid more gun deaths. We must vote into office representatives who are willing to cooperate with finding solutions to the homegrown virus of violence that plagues our nation.

In March, 2021, PBS anchor and reporter Stephanie Sy said what might even have been true: “Forced isolation and kids not being in school and being cut off from their social contacts, that really makes it even harder—when you’re struggling with any kind of mental health issues. For many young people, school is the only safe space.”<sup>60</sup> But as of the end of August, 2023, Everytown for Gun Safety reported at least 86 incidents of gunfire in all K-12 schools and colleges, with 27 deaths and 57 injuries. That’s an average of over ten school shootings each month—or, an incomprehensible two school shootings each week.<sup>61</sup> We are familiar with the potent grip gun interests and money have on Congress, but mass shootings by and of young people is, in no sense of the word, “freedom.” Rather and more accurately, they are desperate cries for help. Caroline Butler, a UNC junior and member of UNC March for Our Lives, said that beyond a political issue, going to the North Carolina General Assembly was, for her, “begging for my life.”<sup>63</sup> Emmy Martin stated the front page of *The Daily Tar Heel* for August 30, 2023, is a cover “way too many people across the nation can connect with.” After the mass shooting at Covenant Presbyterian School in Nashville, Tennessee, students nationwide walked out of school over gun violence. They said they didn’t want to live in fear.<sup>62</sup> If parents and other caring adults think these repeated deaths do not affect children’s education ... think again. Students do not focus on studies nearly enough when their minds replay trauma and they fear the future will only repeat today’s tragedies. It is important, then, that we who will vote listen to cries from our children and young people—who feel choked with fear and distrust and are begging—simply for protection of their lives.