

An Overture Calling for Action so that Children May Live Free from Gun Violence

The Presbytery of _____ overtures the 226th General Assembly to:

A. Call upon every congregation in the PC(U.S.A.) to take some specific action of love and responsibility for children as part of the movement to prevent gun violence.

Action Suggestions for Congregations:

1. Actively support and pray for the emotional, spiritual and mental health needs of children as they grow up in an era of school lockdowns, active shooter drills and near-daily news of gun violence.

2. Promote Secure Gun Storage - Churches of the PC(U.S.A.) can share information about the **Be SMART for Kids** campaign, which provides strategies and resources to protect children from unintentional firearm injury and death. Congregations are gifted at sharing safety information in their communities, which can include life-saving information on the importance of secure gun storage in every home where there is a gun. Congregations can offer free or low cost gun locks to church members, neighbors and others, and encourage schools to send secure gun storage information home in backpacks for parents.

3. Encourage Parents and Caregivers to Take Gun Safety Action- Embolden parents and caretakers to always ask if there is a gun in a home and how it is stored before sending children to play in other homes. Churches can provide parents and caretakers with guidance on how to talk to children and adolescents about what to do if they discover unsecured guns and what to do if they know of a gun that has been brought to school, church or another gathering.

4. End Gun Marketing to Children - Congregations can monitor and advocate with their retail stores to stop the “normalization” of firearms that happens in the mind of a child when guns are advertised to appeal directly to children and displayed in stores where children may see them. This includes the need for retailers to refrain from including toy guns in Easter baskets, Christmas displays and other ways that train children to acclimate to the presence of guns, such as the promotion of the youth-sized JR-15.

5. Promote Gun Security Technology - Learn about and advocate for wide-spread use of existing technology that allows a gun to be fired only by the owner, preventing unintentional shootings, deterring gun theft and preventing youth and child suicide. Promote the use of biometric locks for secure gun storage, limiting access to the gun owner.

6. Act for Change - Demonstrate to children that adults will act to protect them from gun violence: Participate in efforts such as Be SMART for Kids, Guns to Gardens, Violence Interruption Programs; support youth-led gun violence prevention organizations, and gun violence survivors and their families; engage in advocacy with elected officials for gun-sense regulation such as comprehensive background checks, a ban on the future sale of semiautomatic assault weapons and raising the age for gun purchases to 21 or older. Where appropriate, involve children, teens and youth in these efforts.

7. Vote - As citizens, parents and grandparents, prayerfully prioritize the lives of America’s children in determining how to cast our individual votes in local, state and national elections.

B. Additionally, the 226th General Assembly calls upon the PC(USA) Office of Public Witness and the Presbyterian Decade to End Gun Violence to include secure gun storage and the other safety measures listed here in their ongoing gun violence prevention actions, advocacy and resources.

RATIONALE

Hearing Christ's Call:

In Luke 18, we see Jesus on the final journey to Jerusalem. Many adults had been besieging Jesus with questions and challenges. Suddenly Jesus is interrupted by parents who are bringing their children, the "little ones" who in first-century Herodian Palestine were overlooked and expendable. The caregivers seek a blessing, a promise of a safe place to belong, to grow free of harm. The disciples who have been following Jesus dismiss these vulnerable ones. Jesus is indignant, but replies with great kindness, "Let them come to me. They know what my Kin-dom looks like."

As disciples of Christ, we have the same call: to bless all God's children with a place to belong, to grow, to become strong and filled with wisdom and the grace of God (Luke 2: 40). Continuously since the 1968 General Assembly, the Presbyterian family has called upon our officials to save lives through a reasonable regulation of firearms to keep them away from those who may be a danger to themselves or others. The PCUSA has never called for the restriction of guns typically used in hunting or shooting sports. To these prior actions we add steps that local churches can take to protect children in particular.

Acknowledging our Present Reality:

We cannot ignore or dismiss the present reality in the USA: more children are being traumatized, wounded, and killed by guns than by any other danger. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, since 2020 firearms have been the number one cause of death among children and teens in the United States, surpassing even car accidents.¹ From 2017 to 2021, child and teen gun fatalities increased by 40% to 4,739, the largest annual number ever recorded.² In addition to those who die, thousands more young people survive shootings each year with injuries that reverberate for months and years, and with ripple effects on parents, siblings and communities.

A recent Harvard study³ shows that firearm deaths and injuries among youth exert a massive physical toll and mental health burden on survivors and their families. Financial costs are also high, with survivor health spending increasing by \$35,000 in the year following injury. Gun violence inflicts an enormous burden on children and on society, with a disproportionate danger for children of color.⁴ When compared to communicable and infectious diseases, gun violence often poses a larger burden on society in terms of potential years of life lost, as well as the long term impact of trauma on individuals, families and communities. These costs are immeasurable and reverberate through generations.

Recognizing causes and solutions:

1. Unsecured Firearms: The easy access to guns exacerbates the rise in child victims, including gun sales that may not include background checks. There is also an access crisis at the point of gun storage. In America, 4.6 million children live in homes with guns that are both loaded and unlocked, and this number is growing.⁵ Secure gun storage saves lives. **Solutions that congregations can participate in:**

A. The Be SMART for Kids Campaign has been promoted nationwide and utilized by major hospitals, healthcare systems, the American Academy of Pediatrics, law enforcement agencies and schools. Community partners include national organizations like Injury Free Coalition for Kids, Safe Kids Worldwide, National PTA, as well as numerous other state and local partners.

SMART is an acronym that stands for:

S: Secure all guns in your home and vehicles.

M: Model responsible behavior around guns.

A: Ask about the presence of unsecured guns in other homes..

R: Recognize the role of guns in suicide.

T: Tell your peers to be SMART.

Congregations can join in monthly BeSMART conference calls and use printable resources that include:

--*Asking about Secure Gun Storage*, with examples of effective conversation-starters.

--*Keeping Your Home Safe with Secure Storage*, which show how gun owners don't need to choose between storing guns securely and maintaining quick access to them if necessary.

--*Secure Storage Toolkit*, a guide to getting secure storage resolutions passed within school districts.

--*Talking to Your Children about Guns*, a guide that includes specific tips for young children, adolescents.

Learn more at <https://besmartforkids.org/>

Additional Secure Storage Resources:

--Order Gun Safety Cards and the Gun Violence Prevention Congregational Toolkit (2024 Edition) from www.presbypeacefellowship.org/gun-violence (See Section 3: Action)

--Free cable locks for small firearms can be obtained at most local Veterans Administration facilities.

B. Normalize the Ask and Talk about Gun Safety: Child lives can be saved if parents and caregivers will regularly ask friends or neighbors about gun storage in homes where children may visit. Find information on "normalizing the ask" at: <https://www.bradyunited.org/program/end-family-fire/asking-saves-kids> and at https://besmartforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Asking-About-Secure-Gun-Storage_09.2023.pdf While it is always an adult's responsibility to prevent unauthorized access to guns and not a curious child's responsibility to avoid guns, we must talk with children about gun safety. Incorporate the conversation about guns regularly, just as you would about other crucial safety issues. Make sure they understand that any situation where there is an unsupervised gun is a dangerous situation. Simple language could include "If you see a gun, don't touch it. Tell an adult right away." Tell children not to touch a gun, even if it looks like a toy. They should always assume a gun is loaded, and they should tell an adult immediately.

We know that talking to children about guns is only a precaution, not a guarantee of safety. One study found that young children who go through a week-long gun safety training are *just as likely* as children with no training to approach or play with a handgun when they find one.⁶ The gun lobby is promoting legislation that requires the National Rifle Association's "Eddie the Eagle" program in schools. This program was deemed ineffective by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Alternatively, schools can pass secure storage resolutions, notifying parents of the importance of secure storage. The Be SMART for Kids program provides a toolkit as a guide for this action.

C. State Legislation: In addition to supporting a federal secure storage law, congregations can learn about those states that have already adopted laws to hold gun owners accountable for secure storage. States with secure storage laws have lower rates of child gun violence, including child suicide. In these states, the rate of gun suicide among young people ages 10 to 24 was lower in 2022 than in 1999. In states with no secure storage laws, the rate increased 36% during that time.⁷ Congregations have access to their state officials and can learn about gun safety legislation in their state at <https://everytownresearch.org/rankings/>

D. Preventing School Shootings: In addition to reducing child suicide and unintentional shootings, promoting a culture of secure gun storage can reduce school shootings. The US Secret Service has undertaken studies of targeted school violence, covering nearly 40 years of incidents. They found that 3/4 of school shooters simply took an unsecured firearm from the home of a parent or close relative. The number is even higher with school shooters under the age of 18 taking unsecured guns to commit school shootings.⁸ Secure gun storage can help prevent school shootings.

2. Gun Industry Marketing to Children: The normalization of guns to children by retailers is about money and the gun industry. Advertisements and social media posts often appeal to minors, using cartoonish imagery or referencing video games as a way to capture future customers. Toy guns may be included in Christmas displays and Easter baskets. Real guns may be displayed openly where children can see them. And youth versions of guns are now coming on the market, such as the JR-15, a youth-sized version of the AR-15. Retailers that seek to normalize firearms in the mind of a child are adding to the gun-related trauma that America's children are already living with.

Solutions that congregations can participate in: Legislation has a history of protecting children from being groomed as future consumers, such as banning toy cigarettes and prohibiting pornographic materials from open display. Learn what your state is doing to protect children from gun marketing. For instance, Illinois has passed legislation prohibiting advertising to individuals under 18 that encourages the use of a firearm in an unlawful manner, including advertising that uses cartoons, stuffed animals and clothing targeted towards children.⁹

Social media campaigns can add pressure to stores that sell guns, especially assault style rifles, where children and youth under the age of 21 can see them. As suggested in the June 2023 issue of *Presbyterian Outlook*, "Take photos of the displays and use social media to let retailers know that you don't want your children exposed to guns while buying household items like clothing or a soccer ball."¹⁰

3. Inadequate Approaches to Security: It may seem that child lives could be saved by simply arming more adults. That is not the intent of this Overture. Putting children in a setting where there are guns entails many risks. Where there are more guns, guns are more likely to be used, whether unintentionally or by escalation of conflict. Most parents, teachers, and members of law enforcement strongly oppose arming teachers. The National Association of School Resource Officers (school police) and a president of the Major Cities Chiefs of Police Association have each indicated their strong opposition to arming teachers.¹¹

Instead, we need more preventative and comprehensive ways to create secure communities and schools, including creating a culture where secure gun storage is a new norm, and the most destructive firearms are very difficult to obtain. A study by Everytown, the largest gun violence prevention group in the nation, can help congregations identify ways to enhance security in their own buildings and programs, as well as advocate for these policies with their local school boards. <https://everytownresearch.org/report/how-to-stop-shootings-and-gun-violence-in-schools/>

Resources about security in church settings:

Whom Shall I Fear? by Rev. Rosalind Hughes, covers the biblical and practical basis for a nonviolent plan for church security. <https://upperroombooks.com/book/whom-shall-i-fear/?cn-reloaded=1>

Fear Not, A Mennonite curriculum to address church security questions:

<https://mcc.org/fear-not-creating-plan-respond-active-violence>

Beyond these steps, security is based on the positive development of human beings. Schools and other settings for children will be more secure when every person has better access to dignity and to emotional and mental health support than access to firearms. Congregations can nurture the self-worth of each person as a child of God by supporting anti-bullying programs and other ways to foster healthy growth and relationships. One example of this positive approach to security is the **Choose Love Movement**, created by a parent whose child died in 2012 in the Sandy Hook school shooting. See <https://chooselovemovement.org/>

The Local Church: Putting Love into Action

Babies born the year of the watershed Columbine massacre are now 25 years old. No American youth today knows a world without the threat of sudden deadly gun violence. Yet, we affirm that “Children are a heritage from the Lord” (Psalm 127:3) and that our responsibility as a community of Christian adults is to put our love into action to save the lives of children and youth. With suicide representing 4 out of 10 child and youth gun deaths, we have a God-given calling to give America’s children reasons to live and to thrive, as well as to reduce the access to guns for those who would harm themselves or others.

The local church can be one of God’s great vehicles for healing our nation from gun violence. As one pastor put it a few weeks after a mass shooting at their local grocery store: “Don’t underestimate our role as conveners in the community. Our places and spaces as people of faith are game-changers. People are looking to transform all of this trauma....We are made for such a time as this.”¹²

For the local church, preventing gun violence is about the sanctity of life. **We know what to do:**

- Have courageous conversations in our churches and communities about the causes of gun violence;
- Support gun-sense legislation and vote as if the children’s lives depended on it;
- Securely store our firearms and encourage others to do so, using the BeSMART for Kids Campaign;
- Support the Guns to Gardens movement to reduce the number of unwanted guns, preventing them from being re-sold, stolen or used in a suicide or other shooting;¹³
- Hold the gun industry accountable for its impact on children and youth;
- Love our children and youth away from fear and into a sense of abundant life and reasons to live.

Let’s do it. Amen.

Sources:

1 <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/firearms/firearm-research-findings.html>

2 <https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SOAC-2023-Tables.pdf> See p. 35

3 <https://hms.harvard.edu/news/health-economic-toll-gun-violence-youth>

and <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hlthaff.2023.00587>

4 Black children and teens in the United States are 5 times more likely than their white peers to die by guns, Centers for Disease Control, Underlying Cause of Death, Four-Year Average: 2018–2021. See also <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/152/3/e2023061296/193711/Trends-and-Disparities-in-Firearm-Deaths-Among>

5 2021 National Firearms Survey <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8864510/>

6 Marjorie S. Hardy, “Teaching Firearm Safety to Children: Failure of a Program,” Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11943968/>

7 <https://everytownresearch.org/two-decades-of-suicide-prevention-laws-lessons-from-national-leaders-in-gun-safety-policy/>

8 https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Protecting_Americas_Schools.pdf

9 <https://www.illinois.gov/news/press-release.26881.html>

10 *From Despair to Hope: Mobilizing your Church to End Gun Violence*, Rev. Deanna Hollas, *Presbyterian Outlook*, June 2023

11 “NASRO Opposes Arming Teachers,” press release, February 22, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2RdOq55>;

12 Rev. Nicole Lamarche, Community United Church of Christ, Boulder, CO, the first local church to host a Guns to Gardens safe surrender event to dismantle unwanted guns and turn them into garden tools.

13 Commended to congregations by the 225th General Assembly, Guns to Gardens information can be found at www.presbypeacefellowship.org/gun-violence