

Who Do We Love More: Our Guns, or Our Children?

Speech by the Rev. Robert Moore at Gun Safety Rally at Trenton State House on 4/20/23

There is an epidemic of gun violence in America, with over 48,000 deaths—the most ever—at the hand of a gun in 2021, the most recent year for which there is complete data.

So far in 2023, there have been 149 mass shootings, with a sizable portion primarily victimizing youth. This is an average of 1.5 mass shootings per day! Outrageously, gun violence is now the leading cause of death for Americans under 18, surpassing auto accidents for the first time.

In response to this horrifying situation, the NRA and their allies are saying that the primary cause of gun violence is untreated mental illness. But Americans' mental illness rate is not substantially different from other developed countries. And people with mental illnesses don't use guns at a higher rate than those without them.

What is shockingly different is that America's rate of gun deaths is on average 25 times that of other developed countries. And what makes America such a shameful outlier is the easy availability of guns. There are over 400 million guns in the US, an average of more than one per person. A number of mass shootings in recent years were committed with guns the shooter legally obtained just days or weeks before.

And the kind of guns Americans can easily obtain include assault weapons, the weapon of choice for mass shooters. These guns are weapons of war designed for the battlefield. From 1994-2004, they were banned nationally, and the danger of an American being killed in mass shootings declined by 70%. Tragically, that ban was allowed to sunset in 2004.

We can also clearly see a similar dramatic contrast in other countries, for example Australia. In 1996, a single shooter with an assault weapon killed 36 people in Port Arthur. Led by a conservative prime minister, elected officials there came together to ban sales of assault weapons, as well as mandating destruction of already existing ones. There hasn't been an additional mass shooting there since.

Real world data on the differences in gun violence rates in US states with stronger gun safety laws compared with those with looser laws also shows reducing such easy access to guns is what works. For example, New Jersey is ranked as having the second strongest gun safety laws, and has the third lowest per capita rate of gun violence in the nation. Mississippi has the weakest such laws, and has the highest per capita rate of gun deaths. That kind of correlation holds true for virtually all states.

So, we know what works to reduce gun violence and mass shootings in schools and elsewhere. Effective national gun safety laws, such as a renewed National Assault Weapons Ban, are needed to stop our gun violence epidemic.

Here in NJ, 77% of guns used in crimes come from out of state. With the leadership of Gov. Murphy and key state legislators, over 20 new gun safety laws have been signed into law since 2018. I'm proud that our Ceasefire NJ Project has played a strong support role in those successes. But our state laws can't prevent easy access to guns in neighboring states, such as Pennsylvania. What we really need are strong national gun safety laws.

But that is being stymied by the NRA and its allies who promulgate false narratives such as that there aren't enough armed "good guys" nearby. I can't say that a good guy with a gun never stops a mass shooter, but it's extremely rare—less than 0.5% of gun deaths are ruled as justifiable homicides.

In fact, what troubles me lately is the unarmed innocent youth who have been shot just in the last week: a black teen who went to the wrong address to pick up his siblings; cheerleaders who got into the wrong car; four teens killed by other teens at a sweet 16 birthday party; and a young woman killed for simply being in a car that pulled into the wrong driveway! With so many trigger-happy "shoot first, ask questions later" Americans, it is truly time to reduce—not increase—easy access to guns.

As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said, there is a "fierce urgency of now" to take the steps needed to end the nightmare of gun violence and mass shootings in America. We know the facts of what works and what doesn't. The real question is, do we Americans love our children more than our guns?

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