



Preventing Gun Violence

Getting the facts right for gun violence prevention

Introduction

The growing number of tragic, gruesome mass murders in public places in the United States has provoked a much-needed national dialogue on gun violence. Unfortunately, the sensational nature of news agencies and the current polarization of political leaders make logical discussion difficult. Indeed, separating fact from fiction is a chore. Myths are spread as facts. Somehow, we must get beyond beliefs to facts.

The answer to gun violence is not a simple one; but the answer will certainly not be to eliminate all guns nor will it be to arm teachers in every classroom. Both sides of this debate must seek an honest balance of honoring two constitutional rights: the right to keep and bear arms and the right to “domestic tranquility.” Youth should not be afraid to go see a movie or go to school for fear of a deranged killer armed with a semiautomatic gun that he was able to legally purchase from the neighborhood Walmart.

Many youth are discussing gun control policy in and outside the classroom. Because an increasing number of people die from gun related deaths each year in the United States, it is definitely a matter of concern for people of faith. Jesus came so that we might live lives of abundance, not lives of fear.

A 2013 two-hour segment of Chicago Public Radio's *This American Life* (the most popular radio program in the U.S.) revealed the tragic experiences of Chicago's youth, who are trapped in an environment with too many guns (see “For More Information” at the end of this Leader's Guide for a link to the program). Those committed to seeking peace cannot sit still and allow

Session at a Glance

ARRIVING

- Where do you stand now?

GATHERING

- Discuss stances

OPENING

- Pray
- Introduce the session

EXPLORING

- Explore arguments against gun control
- Respond to arguments
- What should be done?

RESPONDING

- Write your position on gun control
- Respond as a group

CLOSING

- One thing I learned
- Follow up
- Pray

our youth to die. Guns may not be the only enemy, but they are a big part of the problem and contribute to many untimely deaths.

To be sure, there is not one single answer to gun violence; not all Christians will agree as to the exact

measures needed to protect citizens. However, by now, almost every Christian denomination in the United States has corporately agreed to endorse gun control policies that make sense.

This study encourages youth to name arguments against gun control made by the well-funded and vocal gun lobby. They will learn facts about gun violence that counter some claims made by the gun lobby and consider various proposals in consideration to control the spread of gun violence. Finally, youth will have the opportunity to write their own position on gun control and think as a group about what they might do together to effect change.

Goal for the Session

Youth will be able to articulate arguments for and against gun control, name specific gun control measures being proposed, and write their own stance. The group will discuss possible actions for their church or their group to take.

Preparing for the Session

- Read through this Leader's Guide and determine how to best lead the session given the dynamics of your specific group. See the "Teaching Alternatives" section at the end for additional ideas. Determine if you have time to do all the activities. Consider making this a two-session study. If you decide to split this session into two parts, consider doing the Arriving, Gathering, and activities 1-4, and 6 for this session. Challenge youth to come to the next session with ideas for preventing gun violence (see activity 5). The second session can be spent exploring these ideas and planning actions that your group could take in the future.
- Make copies of the Participant Handout for each participant.
- Print one copy of appendix 1, found at the end of this Leader's Guide, and cut it into strips for activity 4.
- Print one copy of appendix 2, which includes the footnotes to appendix 1. Some may wish to research the information.
- Prepare six pieces of newsprint to use during the session. Title them as follows:
 - Christians don't kill, so they shouldn't own guns.

- Christians should all own guns. If they love their neighbors, they'll protect their neighbors.
- Other stances on gun control
- Questions to explore
- Relevant Bible passages
- Potential measures to prevent gun violence
- Post the first three pieces of newsprint on a wall in the meeting room for the Arriving activity. The others may either be hung prior to the session or after the Arriving activity.
- Prepare another piece of newsprint titled "Potential Gun Control Measures." This will be posted and used in activity 5. Post these suggestions under the title and leave room for additional ones:
 - Require licensing, registration, and waiting periods to allow comprehensive background checks for all guns.
 - Close the "gun show loophole" by requiring background checks for all gun buyers.
 - Ban semiautomatic assault weapons, armor-piercing handgun ammunition, and .50-caliber sniper rifles.
 - Raise the age for handgun ownership to twenty-one.
 - Encourage law-enforcement agencies to trace crime guns and promote public safety.
 - Restrict open and concealed carry.
- If possible, obtain your denomination's position on gun control to share with the group. Your church pastor should know how to find it. You can also Google your denomination's name and add "gun control position" to see if you find anything. Most Christian denominations support various measures regarding gun control and have resources available. It is also recommended to look at some of the resource Web sites at the end of this Leader's Guide.

Materials Needed

- Newsprint and marker
- One copy of appendix 1 from this Leader's Guide, cut into strips
- One copy of appendix 2 from this Leader's Guide
- Copies of the Participant Handout for each participant
- Pens and paper for each participant

Teaching Tips

- It is not important that all youth agree. Encourage respectful dialogue. Christians do not all agree on this issue, especially in the United States, where gun ownership is mentioned in the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Some youth may believe that their faith calls them to reject guns while others do not. Help all youth articulate their views, knowing that they may change their mind over time.
- Don't feel that you need to be the expert on guns or on gun control to lead this session. Be aware of your own feelings and position and try to not preach your view to the youth. Nothing can turn them off more when discussing a topic such as this. Trust that the Holy Spirit will do its work. You do yours by providing an open, accepting space to discuss information and educate participants about the facts.
- Consider listening to the two hour-long episodes of *This American Life* mentioned in the "For More Information" section prior to leading the session. For many people who live in areas where gun violence is not a daily threat, the issue of gun violence and how to prevent it can become either an academic debate about facts or remain a political topic based on principles of gun rights rather than dealing with how peoples' lives are truly affected by gun violence. This may be a resource to recommend to participants. Be sure to warn youth that some may find these episodes graphic and disturbing.

Arriving

Where Do You Stand Now?

Welcome youth as they arrive and point to the three pieces of newsprint on the wall labeled:

- Christians don't kill, so they shouldn't own guns.
- Christians should all own guns. If they love their neighbors, they'll protect their neighbors.
- Other stances on gun control

Encourage them to think about which of the first two statements they most agree with and to write down any biblical text or story they believe supports the argument. For example, some may believe that the commandment "Thou shall not kill" or Jesus' suggestion that followers

turn the other cheek when wronged, prohibits Christians from even owning a gun. Those in support of guns may believe that loving one's neighbor means protecting him or her from harm, and that may mean using a gun.

If participants do not agree with either statement, ask them to write a stance on gun control that they believe is a faithful one. Likewise, encourage them to include any biblical text or story that supports the stance.

Gathering Discuss Stances

Gather as a group and briefly discuss the various stances mentioned. Take an informal straw poll from participants about which statement most resembles their own feelings at the moment.

Post the other two pieces of newsprint, "Questions to explore" and "Relevant Bible passages," and encourage youth to create and add to these lists at any time during the session.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Pray

Pray this prayer or one of your choosing:

Heavenly Creator, we are grateful for the opportunity to gather today in your name. We pray for health and strength for those who are unable to be here and we ask you to guide our hearts and minds as we discuss an important issue affecting many people in our society. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

2. Introduce the Session

Take a few minutes to set the tone for the session. Acknowledge that there is a great deal of misinformation being spread about facts and figures. This has led to a distrust of any figures, since there is so much opposition to seemingly every use of data about gun violence. Inform the group that the information used in this session is all taken from studies that follow scientific methods and that are published by credible groups such as the Center for Disease Control.

Explain the session agenda. In the Exploring section, the group will name arguments frequently used by those opposed to gun control. You will then form small groups and look at some facts and quotes and determine which argument from the gun lobby each fact best addresses.

After sharing that information in a large group, there will be a time of silence as participants write down their views. Finally, as a group you will discuss potential actions to take together as a group or as a church.

Set ground rules if necessary. Here are some that may be beneficial to your group:

- All opinions will be valued and heard.
- If there is disagreement about information shared, we will write it on the newsprint and agree to find the source in order to clarify it before we meet again.
- The goal is not to agree but to understand various viewpoints.

Teaching Tip

The reason it is important to mention misinformation is that the gun lobby has spread much information by a scientist whose findings have been called into question and shown to be false. Yet it continues to be spread. Scientific methods of research actually do help us discover facts and what works and what does not. This is why it is so important to denounce misinformation. It is misleading and harmful.

Exploring (25 minutes)

3. Explore Arguments against Gun Control

Invite the group to call out arguments they have heard against gun control. Write these on the board or another piece of newsprint. Leave enough room under each argument to add related information found in the next activity.

Some arguments participants offer may include:

- Guns don't kill; people kill.
- If guns are outlawed, only outlaws will own guns.
- Guns are a deterrent. If criminals know someone might have a gun, they will be more careful and there will be less violence.
- We don't need more gun laws. We need to enforce the ones we already have.
- Guns save lives.
- Gun control doesn't work.
- The Second Amendment prohibits any gun control.

4. Respond to Arguments

Form small groups of three or four persons and distribute slips of paper cut from appendix 1 so that each group has approximately the same number.

Have groups read the slips of paper and determine which argument against gun control the slip best addresses. Each small group should be prepared to present their findings to the large group.

After a few minutes, have each group make their presentation. Write a brief summary of their slip of paper under the argument against gun control that they paired it with. Discuss which arguments are the most persuasive and which ones need more information.

If you know the position of your own denomination, you might briefly state it now. Affirm that some may not agree with the position of your church but that they should know what it is.

5. What Should Be Done?

Post the sheet of newsprint prepared before the session titled "Potential measures to prevent gun violence." Based on what has been discussed so far, facilitate a short discussion about which measures seem most reasonable. Add to the list if youth have additional ideas.

Responding (15 minutes)

6. Write Your Position on Gun Control

If you have not already distributed the Participant Handout, do so now. Allow several minutes for participants to write their position on gun control on the handout. Assure them that they will not be required to show this to anyone else. After a few minutes, allow a few volunteers to read what they wrote.

7. Respond as a Group

In a large group, brainstorm actions that your group or church might take to prevent gun violence. Write them on the list you began in activity 5. Choose one idea as a group and discuss how you will proceed with the idea. Depending on the nature of your group and where you are located, responses will vary widely. Some churches located in inner city, high-crime areas have become drop-off places for weapons. No questions are asked of those who dispose of their firearms. Perhaps in more rural areas, a group could distribute gun safety information.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. One Thing I Learned

Provide the opportunity for members of the group to either read their gun control statements or share one

thing they learned today. Participants can choose to pass if they prefer not to say anything.

9. Follow Up

Quickly review the newsprint where questions were left. Decide who will research each question and come back with the answer for the group.

10. Pray

Pray this prayer or one of your own:

God, your prophets promise that the day will come when the wolf will lie down with the lamb, that swords will be turned into plowshares, and peace will reign at last. Please make this day come soon. Use our lives to create your peaceful kingdom on earth. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Teaching Alternatives

- Incorporate parts of the *This American Life* podcasts found in the "For More Information" section below. Perhaps there is a ten-minute segment that the group can listen and react to before activity 5.
- Have youth use their smart phones to browse Web sites mentioned in the "For More Information" section below. They might work in small groups and prepare a summary of what is available from each site.
- Obtain copies of statements and resources concerning gun violence prevention from your denominational offices. Distribute them to the group and highlight important features of the statements. Discuss whether the youth agree or disagree with the positions based on what they know.
- This study is adapted from an adult study titled: "Gun Control: Beyond the Myths." Consider using this study at the same time that an adult group in your church studies the topic. Then have an inter-generational dialogue.

Key Scriptures

Exodus 20:13 (Do not kill)

Isaiah 2:4 (Beat their swords into plowshares)

Isaiah 11:6 (The wolf shall lie down with the lamb)

Matthew 5:39 (Turn the other cheek)

Mark 12:31 (Love your neighbor as yourself)

For More Information

This American Life is a weekly public radio show produced by Chicago Public Media and distributed by Public Radio International. It is the most popular podcast in the country. In 2013 they spent two episodes, 487 and 488, interviewing students, teachers, and administrators at Harper High School in Chicago about the realities of living in an area plagued by gun violence. Hearing how youth (and all who care about them) cope with this reality is heart wrenching. It transforms the issue from an often sterile discussion about rights into a faith issue about how to best care for one another. Go to www.thisamericanlife.org and find episodes 487 and 488. Stream them from your computer, download them to a device, or print the transcripts.

The Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence: www.bradycampaign.org.

The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence: www.csgv.org.

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg Center for Gun Policy and Research: <http://www.jhsph.edu/gunpolicy>.

National Rifle Association: <http://www.nrahq.org/education/guide.asp>.

A movie clip from [Moveon.org](http://www.moveon.org) that criticizes the NRA for being run by gun manufacturers rather than gun owners: <http://front.moveon.org/shocking-the-truth-about-whos-running-the-nra/>.

About the Writer

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Appendix 1

Cut the following statements into individual slips of paper with one statement on each slip. Mix them up. This is to be used in activity 4.

Among the world's twenty-three wealthiest countries, 80 percent of all gun deaths are American deaths and 87 percent of all kids killed by guns are American kids.¹

In the eighteen years between 1979 and 1997, more Americans were killed by guns (651,697) than all servicemen and women killed in battle in all of the United States' wars since 1775 (650,858).²

It certainly takes a human finger to pull the trigger of a gun to kill someone else. Yet knives, clubs, broken bottles, baseball bats, brass knuckles, and rope are much less efficient in maiming or killing when compared with a gun.

Nearly 1.7 million kids under the age of eighteen live in homes with firearms that are both loaded and unlocked.³ Children, inquisitive by nature, explore their homes. If they discover a gun in a dresser or closet, *even if they have been told not to touch it*, they will frequently pull the trigger, killing themselves, a playmate, or a family member. About half of the youth gun deaths in the U.S. each year are due to the fact that an adult did not secure the gun.

American women overwhelmingly bear the brunt of gun violence in the home. One third of all murders of women are committed by their intimate partners, compared to only 4 percent of murders committed against men.⁴ Between 1995 and 2003, after Canada tightened its gun laws, gun homicides for women dropped 40 percent.⁵

The fact is that where there are more guns, more people die from guns. Arguing that guns don't kill without a human being is a philosophical argument that avoids the truth. Guns kill.

With all restrictions on gun purchases removed, criminals, terrorists, and violent individuals are free to buy guns with no questions asked at the nation's thousands of gun shows. From September 11, 2001 through February 2010, over a thousand persons on the FBI's no-fly list have legally purchased guns and explosives.⁶

Every major Christian denomination and religious body in the country, along with police and professional associations have called for a ban on assault weapons. None has called for an outright ban on all guns.

Overlooked by those who propose arming teachers is what really happens the instant a gun is fired in a crowd: utter chaos. Calm and cool reasoning by average citizens is not part of a shootout. When Arizona Congresswoman Gabby Giffords was shot and almost killed at a January 2011 public meeting in Tucson, bystander Joe Zamudio pulled his gun and later confessed that he almost shot the very man who tackled Jared Loughner, the shooter, when he tried to put a new magazine into his gun.

Some proclaim, "Freedom isn't free. This is the price America has to pay for freedom." The question is whether a free society should make it easier or harder for violent persons to get guns. Is it a genuine hardship for citizens to undergo an instantaneous background check for all guns sold? Is this really a restriction on freedom?

On February 2, 2013, Chris Kyle and a colleague befriended a fellow Marine suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and took him to a shooting range. Kyle was a highly trained Navy SEAL who served four tours of duty in Iraq, where he earned a reputation as one of the military's most lethal snipers. Although credited with 150 kills and although he had a gun in his hand, he was shot dead along with his friend, at the shooting range. The assailant shot first and Kyle's gun could not protect him.⁷

We are the most heavily armed country in the free world. If more arms really made a society polite, we should be able to see more evidence of it. The United States should already be the most polite country in the world. Unfortunately, the reality is the opposite.

Recent research revealed that there are “about 300 major state and federal laws on guns and an unknown but shrinking number of local laws due to the fact that forty of our states have preempted all or most local gun laws.”⁸

Of the laws that do exist regarding guns, many actually pose a threat to our nation’s security by exacerbating crime. Many laws were passed by Congress that make it easier for *anyone* to get a gun at any time, and make it more difficult for law enforcement (ATF and FBI) to stop the sale. Law enforcement is actually prevented from effective and efficient oversight of guns in America by senseless laws. Too often the right of anyone to own a gun triumphs over commonsense measures for public safety, including the safety of guns themselves. Society pays a heavy price in death and injury when these laws hold sway.

We have all heard stories of individuals who fired their guns to foil a burglar or an attacker who attempted to enter a home or do harm. Such reports make for sensational news on evening television. According to statistics of the FBI and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there are very few cases of justifiable homicide each year and the person using the gun is usually a trained police officer, not a private citizen.

Every year there are only about 200 legally justified self-defense homicides by private citizens. A gun in the home is eleven times more likely to be used in a completed or attempted suicide, seven times more likely to be used in criminal assault or homicide, and four times more likely to be used in an unintentional shooting death or injury than to be used in a self-defense shooting.⁹ Yes, guns do save some lives, but they *take many* more lives and at incredible rates.

Those who say gun control doesn’t work often base their statements on cities such as Washington, DC or Chicago, that have strong gun control laws, but still suffer high crime rates. However, looking closely at the evidence, we see that there is highly developed gun trafficking in neighboring and even far away states with criminal entrepreneurs, traffickers, straw buyers, and gun dealers who look the other way when an illegal sale is made. For example, 10 percent of crime guns in Chicago have been traced to Mississippi, whose laws are almost nonexistent. Washington, DC has strong gun laws but is only a ten-minute drive away from Virginia with its lax gun laws. It is a simple task to find a straw buyer (someone who can pass a background check and purchase a gun for someone who cannot) who needs some extra cash. It is easier still to get a gun at one of Virginia’s omnipresent gun shows where unlicensed sellers ask no questions and everything is cash and carry.

The fact is that gun control does work and works well. Five states with the strongest laws (Hawaii, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, and New Jersey) claim the lowest gun-related death rates per 100,000 persons. Conversely, five states with the weakest gun laws (Alaska, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, and Wyoming) have the highest gun-related death rates. The states with strong gun laws restrict access to highly dangerous weapons, set minimum safety standards on guns, enforce age requirements, and restrict open and concealed carry. It is really a simple equation: access to more guns leads to more gun deaths. Limiting exposure to guns saves lives.¹⁰

The Second Amendment reads, “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.” Gun enthusiasts often quote it, or the second half of it, much more than those who are advocates for gun safety. Nevertheless, the Second Amendment is a good friend to both sides. It addresses both gun rights and good regulations that provide security for all. The amendment, contrary to popular opinion, is not the property of pro-gun people; it belongs to every American.

In 2008, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia said, “like most rights, the Second Amendment is not unlimited. It is not a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any manner whatsoever and for whatever purpose. The Court’s opinion [on a particular case he was writing about] should not be taken to cast doubt on longstanding prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms.”¹¹

Appendix 2

Notes from Appendix 1

1. Bill Weir, "Gun Deaths: A Familiar American Experience," *ABC News*, July 21, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/07/gun-deaths-a-familiar-american-experience/>.
2. Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, "More Americans Killed by Guns than by War in the 20th Century" (December 30, 1999), <http://www.bradiycampaign.org/media/press/view/289>.
3. Sy Kraft, "National ASK Day Promotes Children's Gun Safety," *Medical News Today*, <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/229340.php>.
4. Julie Samuels, *Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey* (Department of Justice, 2000).
5. Amnesty International, "The Impact of Guns on Women's Lives" (Oxford: Alden Press, 2005), 14. Accessed at <http://controlarms.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/The-Impact-of-Guns-on-Womens-Lives.pdf>.
6. Testimony of Eileen Larance at Homeland Security and Justice Committee, May 5, 2010.
7. Manny Fernandez and Michael Schwartz, "Untouchable in Iraq: Ex-Sniper Dies in a Shooting." *New York Times*, February 3, 2013.
8. Jon Vernick and Lisa Hepburn. "Twenty Thousand Gun Control Laws?" Center of Urban and Metropolitan Policy Research brief. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institutions, 2002).
9. "Overview," Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, <http://www.bradiycampaign.org/facts/gunviolence?s=1>.
10. Catherine A Okoro, et al., "Prevalence of Household Firearms and Firearms Storage Practices in the 50 States and the District of Columbia: Findings from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2002," *Pediatrics* 116, no. 3 (September 2005): e370-76; this is the most recent comprehensive data available on state gun ownership.
11. "District of Columbia et al. v. Heller," Legal Information Institute, Cornell University Law School, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/07-290.ZS.html>.